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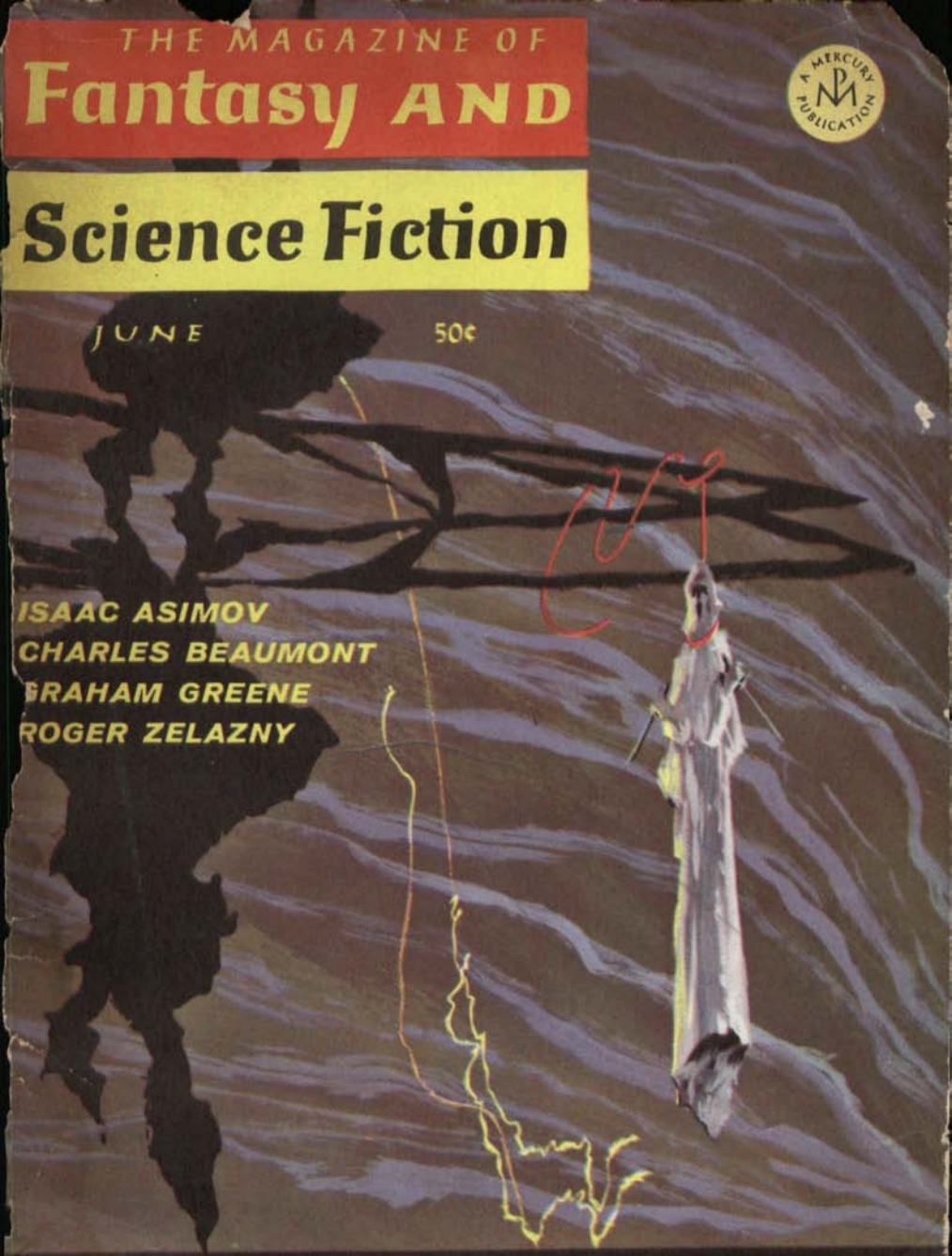

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Fantasy and Science Fiction

JUNE

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In this imaginative blend of fantasy and SF with Hindu and Buddhist legend (a sequel to DAWN, April 1967), our hero, variously known here as Siddhartha, Tathagatha, the Buddha, and Sam, is threatened by the two most formidable and violent agents of Kali, goddess of Death.

DEATH AND THE EXECUTIONER

by Roger Zelazny

It is said that when the Teacher appeared, those of all castes went to hear his teachings, as well as animals, gods, and an occasional saint, to come away improved and uplifted. It was generally conceded that he had received enlightenment, except by those who believed him to be a fraud, sinner, criminal, or practical joker. These latter ones were not all to be numbered as his enemies, but on the other hand, not all of those improved and uplifted could be counted as his friends and supporters. His followers called him Mahasamatman, and some said he was a god. So, after it was seen that he had been accepted as a teacher, was looked upon with respect, had many of the wealthy numbered as his supporters, and had gained a reputation reaching far across the land, he was referred to as Tathagatha, meaning He Who Has Achieved. It must be noted that while the goddess Kali (sometimes known as Durga in her softer moments) never voiced a formal opinion as to his Buddhahood, she did render him the singular honor of dispatching her holy executioner to pay him her tribute, rather than a mere hired assassin . . .

> There is no disappearing of the true Dhamma until a false Dhamma arises in the world. When the false Dhamma arises, he makes the true Dhamma to disappear.
>
> Samyutta-nikaya (II, 224)

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NEAR THE CITY OF ALUNDIL there was a rich grove of blue-barked trees, having purple foliage like feathers. It was famous for its beauty and the shrine-like peace of its shade. It had been the property of the merchant Vasu until his conversion, at which time he had presented it to the teacher variously known as Mahasamatman, Tathagatha, and the Enlightened One. In that wood did this teacher abide with his followers, and when they walked forth into the town at midday, their begging bowls never went unfilled.

There was always a large number of pilgrims about the grove. The believers, the curious, and those who preyed upon the others were constantly passing through it. They came by horseback, they came by boat, they came on foot.

Alundil was not an overly large city. It had its share of thatched huts, as well as wooden bungalows; its main roadway was unpaved and rutted; it had two large bazaars and many small ones; there were wide fields of grain, owned by the Vaisyas, tended by the Sudras, which flowed and rippled blue-green about the city; it had many hostels (though none so fine as the legendary hostel of Hawkana, in far Mahartha) because of the constant passage of travelers; it had its holy men and its story tellers; and it had its Temple.

The Temple was located on a low hill near the center of town, enormous gates on each of its four sides. These gates, and the walls about them, were filled with layer upon layer of decorative carvings, showing musicians and dancers, warriors and demons, gods and goddesses, animals and artists, love-makers and half-people, guardians and devas. These gates led into the first courtyard, which held more walls and more gates, leading in turn into the second courtyard. The first courtyard contained a little bazaar, where offerings to the gods were sold. It also housed numerous small shrines dedicated to the lesser deities. There were begging beggars, meditating holy men, laughing children, gossiping women, burning incenses, singing birds, gurgling purification tanks, and humming pray-o-mats to be found in this courtyard at any hour of the day.

The inner courtyard, though, with its massive shrines dedicated to the major deities, was a focal point of religious intensity. People chanted or shouted prayers, mumbled verses from the Vedas, or stood, or knelt, or lay prostrate before huge stone images, which often were so heavily garlanded with flowers, smeared with red *kumkum* paste, and surrounded by heaps of offerings that it was impossible to tell which deity was so immersed in tangible adoration. Periodically, the horns of the Temple were blown, there was a moment's hushed appraisal of their

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echo, and the clamor began again.

And none would dispute the fact that Kali was queen of this Temple. Her tall, whitestone statue, within its gigantic shrine, dominated the inner courtyard. Her faint smile, perhaps contemptuous of the other gods and their worshippers, was, in its way, as arresting as the chained grins of the skulls she wore for a necklace. She held daggers in her hands—and poised in mid-step she stood, as though deciding whether to dance before or slay those who came to her shrine. Her lips were full, her eyes were wide. Seen by torchlight, she seemed to move.

It was fitting, therefore, that her shrine faced upon that of Yama, God of Death. It had been decided, logically enough, by the priests and architects, that he was best suited of all the deities to spend every minute of the day facing her, matching his unfaltering death-gaze against her own, returning her half-smile with his twisted one. Even the most devout generally made a detour, rather than pass between the two shrines, and after dark, their section of the courtyard was always the abode of silence and stillness, being untroubled by late worshippers.

From out of the north, as the winds of spring blew across the land, there came the one called Rild. A small man, whose hair was white, though his years were few: Rild, who wore the dark trappings of a pilgrim, but about whose forearm, when they found him lying in a ditch with the fever, was wound the crimson strangling cord of his true profession: Rild.

Rild came in the spring, at festival time, to Alundil of the blue-green fields, of the thatched huts and the bungalows of wood, of unpaved roadways and many hostels, of bazaars and holy men and story tellers, of the great religious revival and its Teacher, whose reputation had spread far across the land: to Alundil of the Temple, where his patron goddess was queen.

Festival time.

Twenty years earlier, Alundil's small festival had been an almost exclusively local affair. Now, though, with the passage of countless travelers, caused by the presence of the Enlightened One who taught the Way of the Eightfold Path, the Festival of Alundil attracted so many pilgrims that local accommodations were filled to overflowing. Those who possessed tents could charge a high fee for their rental. Stables were rented out for human occupancy. Even bare pieces of land were let as camping sites.

Alundil loved its Buddha. Many other towns had tried to entice him away from his purple grove: Shengodu, Flower of the Mountains, had offered him a palace and harem, to come and bring

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his teaching to the slopes. But the Enlightened One did not go to the mountain. Kannaka, of the Serpent River, had offered him elephants and ships, a town house and a country villa, horses and servants, to come and preach from its wharves. But the Enlightened One did not go to the river.

The Buddha remained in his grove and all things came to him. With the passage of years the festival grew larger and longer and more elaborate, like a well-fed dragon, scales all a-shimmer. The local Brahmins did not approve of the anti-ritualistic teachings of the Buddha, but his presence filled their coffers to overflowing; so they learned to live in his squat shadow, never voicing the word *tirthika*—heretic.

So the Buddha remained in his grove and all things came to him, including Rild.

Festival time.

The drums began in the evening on the third day.

On the third day, the massive drums of the kathakali began their rapid thunder. The miles-striding staccato of the drums carried across the fields to the town, across the town, across the purple grove and across the wastes of marshland that lay behind it. The drummers, wearing white *mundus*, bare to the waist, their dark flesh glistening with perspiration, worked in shifts, so strenuous was the mighty beating they set up, and never was the flow of sound broken, even as the new relay of drummers moved into position before the tightly stretched heads of the instruments.

As darkness arrived in the world, the travelers and townsmen who had begun walking as soon as they heard the chatter of the drums, began to arrive at the festival field, large as a battlefield of old. There, they found places and waited for the night to deepen and the drama to begin, sipping the sweet-smelling tea which they purchased at the stalls beneath the trees.

A great brass bowl of oil, tall as a man, wicks hanging down over its edges, stood in the center of the field. These wicks were lighted, and torches flickered beside the tents of the actors.

The drumming, at close range, was deafening and hypnotic, the rhythms complicated, syncopated, insidious. As midnight approached, the devotional chanting began, rising and falling with the drumbeat, working a net about the senses.

There was a brief lull as the Enlightened One and his monks arrived, their yellow robes near-orange in the flamelight. But they threw back their cowls and seated themselves cross-legged upon the ground. After a time, it was only the chanting and the voices of the drums which filled the minds of the spectators.

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When the actors appeared, gigantic in their makeup, anklebells jangling as their feet beat the ground, there was no applause, only rapt attention. The *kathakali* dancers were famous, trained from their youth in acrobatics as well as the ages-old patterns of the classical dance, knowing the nine distinct movements of the neck and of the eyeballs and the hundreds of hand positions required to reenact the ancient epics of love and battle, of the encounters of gods and demons, of the valiant fights and bloody treacheries of tradition. The musicians shouted out the words of the stories as the actors, who never spoke, portrayed the awesome exploits of Rama and of the Pandava brothers. Wearing makeup of green and red, of black and stark white, they stalked across the field, skirts billowing, their mirror-sprinkled haloes glittering in the light of the lamp. Occasionally, the lamp would flare or sputter, and it was as if a nimbus of holy or unholy light played about their heads, erasing entirely the sense of the event, causing the spectators to feel for a moment that they themselves were the illusion and that the great-bodied figures of the cyclopean dance were the only real things in the world.

The dance would continue until daybreak, to end with the rising of the sun.

Before daybreak, however, one of the wearers of the saffron robe arrived from the direction of town, made his way through the crowd, and spoke into the ear of the Enlightened One.

The Buddha began to rise, appeared to think better of it, and reseated himself. He gave a message back to the monk, who nodded and departed from the field of the festival.

The Buddha, looking imperturbable, returned his attention to the drama. A monk seated nearby noted that the Buddha was tapping his fingers upon the ground and decided that he must be keeping time with the drumbeats, for it was common knowledge that the Enlightened One was above such things as impatience.

When the drama had ended and Surya the sun pinked the skirts of heaven above the eastern rim of the world, it was as if the night just passed had held the crowd prisoner within a tense and frightening dream, from which they were just now released, weary, to wander this day.

The Buddha and his followers set off walking immediately in the direction of the town. They did not pause to rest along the way, but passed through Alundil at a rapid but dignified gait.

When they came again to the purple grove, the Enlightened One instructed his monks to take rest, and he moved off in the direction of a small pavilion located deep within the wood.

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The monk who had brought the message during the drama sat within the pavilion. There he tended the fever of the traveler whom he had come upon in the marshes, where he walked often to meditate better upon the putrid condition his body would assume after death.

Tathagatha studied the man who lay upon the sleeping mat. His lips were thin and pale; he had a high forehead, high cheekbones, frosty eyebrows, pointed ears; and Tathagatha guessed that when those eyelids rose, the eyes revealed would be of a faded blue or gray. There was a quality of—translucency?—fragility perhaps, about his unconscious form, which might have been partly caused by the fevers racking his body, but which could not be attributed entirely to them. The small man did not give the impression of being one who would bear the thing which Tathagatha now raised in his hands. Rather, on first viewing, he might seem to be a very old man. If one granted him a second look and realized then that his colorless hair and his slight frame did not signify advanced age, one might then be struck by something childlike about his appearance. From the condition of his complexion, Tathagatha doubted that he needed to shave very often. Perhaps a slightly mischievous pucker was now hidden somewhere between his cheeks and the corners of his mouth. Perhaps not, also.

The Buddha raised the crimson strangling cord which was a thing borne only by the holy executioners of the goddess Kali. He fingered its silken length, and it passed like a serpent through his hand, clinging slightly. He did not doubt but that it was intended to move in such a manner about his throat. Almost unconsciously, he held it and twisted his hands through the necessary movements.

Then he looked up at the wide-eyed monk who had watched him, smiled his imperturbable smile, and laid the cord aside.

With a damp cloth, the monk wiped the perspiration from the pale brow. The man on the sleeping mat shuddered at the contact, and his eyes snapped open. The madness of the fever was in them and they did not truly see, but Tathagatha felt a sudden jolt at their contact.

Dark, so dark they were almost jet, and it was impossible to tell where the pupil ended and the iris began. There was something extremely unsettling about eyes of such power in a body so frail and effete.

He reached out and stroked the man's hands, and it was like touching steel, cold and impervious. He drew his fingernail sharply across the back of the right hand. No scratch nor indentation marked its passage, and his nail fairly slid, as though across a pane of glass. He

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squeezed the man's thumbnail and released it. There was no sudden change of color. It was as though these hands were dead or mechanical things.

He continued his examination. The phenomenon ended somewhat above the wrists, occurred again in other places. His hands, breast, abdomen, neck, and portions of his back had soaked within the death bath, which gave this special unyielding power. Total immersion would, of course, have proved fatal, but as it was, the man had traded some of his tactile sensitivity for the equivalent of invisible gauntlets, breastplate, neckpiece, and back armor of steel. He was indeed one of the select assassins of the terrible goddess.

"Who else knows of this man?" asked the Buddha.

"The monk Simha," replied the other, "who helped me bear him here."

"Did he see," Tathagatha gestured with his eyes toward the crimson cord, "that?"

The monk nodded.

"Then go fetch him. Bring him to me at once. Do not mention anything of this to anyone, other than that a pilgrim was taken ill and we are tending him here. I will personally take over his care and minister to his illness."

"Yes, Illustrious One."

The monk hurried forth from the pavilion.

Tathagatha seated himself beside the sleeping mat and waited.

It was two days before the fever broke and intelligence returned to those dark eyes. But during those two days, anyone who passed by the pavilion might have heard the voice of the Enlightened One droning on and on, as though he addressed his sleeping charge. Occasionally, the man himself mumbled and spoke loudly, as those in a fever often do.

On the second day, the man opened his eyes suddenly and stared upward. Then he frowned and turned his head.

"Good morning, Rild," said Tathagatha.

"You-are—?" asked the other, in an unexpected baritone.

"One who teaches the way of liberation," he replied.

"The Buddha?"

"I have been called such."

"Tathagatha?"

"This name, too, have I been given."

The other attempted to rise, failed, settled back. His eyes never left the placid countenance.

"How is it that you know my name?" he finally asked.

"In your fever you spoke considerably."

"Yes, I was very sick, and doubtless babbling. It was in that cursed swamp that I took the chill."

"One of the disadvantages of traveling alone is that when you fall there is none to assist you."

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"True . . ." acknowledged Rild, and his eyes closed once more and his breathing deepened.

Tathagatha remained in the lotus posture, waiting.

When Rild awakened again it was evening.

". . . Thirsty," he said.

Tathagatha gave him water.

"Hungry?" he asked.

"No, not yet. My stomach would rebel."

He raised himself up onto his elbows and stared at his attendant. Then he sank back upon the mat.

"You are the one," he announced.

"Yes," replied the other.

"What are you going to do?"

"Feed you, when you say you are hungry."

"I mean, after that."

"Watch as you sleep, lest you lapse again into the fever."

"That is not what I meant."

"I know."

"After I have eaten and rested and recovered my strength—what then?"

Tathagatha smiled as he drew the silken cord from somewhere beneath his robe.

"Nothing," he replied, "nothing at all," and he draped the cord across Rild's shoulder and withdrew his hand.

The other shook his head and leaned back. He reached up and fingered the length of crimson. He twined it about his fingers and then about his wrist. He stroked it.

"It is holy," he said, after a time.

"So it would seem."

"You know its use, and its purpose?"

"Of course."

"Why then will you do nothing at all?"

"I have no need to move or to act. All things come to me. If anything is to be done, it is you who will do it."

"I do not understand."

"I know that, too."

The man stared into the shadows overhead.

"I will attempt to eat now," he announced.

Tathagatha gave him broth and bread, which he managed to keep down. Then he drank more water, and when he had finished, he was breathing heavily.

"You have offended Heaven," he stated.

"Of that, I am aware."

". . . And you have detracted from the glory of a goddess, whose supremacy here has always been undisputed."

"I know."

"But I owe you my life, and I have eaten your bread . . ."

There was no reply.

"Because of this, I must break a most holy vow," finished Rild. "I cannot kill you, Tathagatha."

"Then I owe my life to the fact that you owe me yours. Let us consider the life-owing balanced."

Rild uttered a short chuckle.

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"So be it," he said.

"What will you do, now that you have abandoned your mission?"

"I do not know. My sin is too great to permit me to return. Now I, too, have offended against Heaven, and the goddess will turn away her face from my prayers. I have failed her."

"Such being the case, remain here. You will at least have company in damnation."

"Very well," agreed Rild. "There is nothing else left to me."

He slept once again, and the Buddha smiled.

In the days which followed, as the festival wore on, the Enlightened One preached to the crowds who passed through the purple grove. He spoke of the unity of all things, great and small, of the law of cause, of becoming and dying, of the illusion of the world, of the spark of the *atman*, of the way of salvation through renunciation of the self and union with the whole; he spoke of realization and enlightenment, of the meaninglessness of the Brahmins' rituals, comparing their forms to vessels empty of content. Many listened, a few heard, and some remained in the purple grove, to take up the saffron robe of the seeker.

And each time he taught, the man Rild sat nearby, wearing his black garments and leather harness, his strange dark eyes ever upon him.

Two weeks after his recovery, Rild came upon the teacher as he walked through the grove in meditation. He fell into step beside him, and after a time he spoke.

"Enlightened One, I have listened to your teachings, and I have listened well. Much have I thought upon your words."

The other nodded.

"I have always been a religious man," he stated, "or I would not have been selected for the post I once occupied. After it became impossible for me to fulfill my mission, I felt a great emptiness. I had failed my goddess, and life was without meaning for me."

The other listened, silently.

". . . But I have heard your words," he said, "and they have filled me with a kind of joy. They have shown me another way to salvation, a way which I feel to be superior to the one I previously followed."

The Buddha studied his face as he spoke.

"Your way of renunciation is a strict one, which I feel to be good. It suits my needs. Therefore, I request permission to be taken into your community of seekers and to follow your path."

"Are you certain," asked the Enlightened One, "that you do not seek merely to punish yourself for what has been weighing upon your conscience as a failure, or a sin?"

"Of that I am certain," said Rild. "I have held your words within me

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and felt the truth which they contain. In the service of the goddess have I slain more men than purple fronds upon yonder bough. I am not even counting women and children. So I am not easily taken in by words, having heard too many, voiced in all tones of speech —words pleading, arguing, cursing. But your words move me, and they are superior to the teachings of the Brahmins. Gladly, would I become your executioner, dispatching for you your enemies with a saffron cord—or with a blade, or pike, or with my hands, for I am proficient with all weapons, having spent three lifetimes learning their use—but I know that such is not your way. Death and life are as one to you, and you do not seek the destruction of your enemies. So I request entrance to your Order. For me, it is not so difficult a thing as it would be for another. One must renounce home and family, origin and property. I lack these things. One must renounce one's own will, which I have already done. All I need now is the yellow robe."

"It is yours," said Tathagatha, "with my blessing."

Rild donned the robe of a Buddhist monk and took to fasting and meditating. After a week, when the festival was near to its close, he departed into the town with his begging bowl, in the company of the other monks. He did not return with them, however. The day wore on into evening, the evening into darkness. The horns of the Temple had already sounded the last notes of the *nagaswaram*, and many of the travelers had since departed the festival.

For a long while, the Enlightened One walked the woods, meditating. Then he, too, vanished.

Down from the grove with the marshes at its back, toward the town of Alundil above which lurked the hills of rock and around which lay the blue-green fields, into the town of Alundil, still astir with travelers, many of them at the height of their revelry, up the streets of Alundil toward the hill with its Temple, walked the Buddha.

He entered the first courtyard, and it was quiet there. The dogs and children and beggars had gone away. The priests slept. One drowsing attendant sat behind a bench at the bazaar. Many of the shrines were now empty, the statues having been borne within. Before several of the others, worshippers knelt in late prayer.

He entered the inner courtyard.

An ascetic was seated on a prayer mat before the statue of Ganesha. He, too, seemed to qualify as a statue, making no visible movements. Four oil lamps flickered about the yard, their dancing light serving primarily to accentuate the shadows which lay upon most of the shrines. Small votive

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lights cast a faint illumination upon some of the statues.

Tathagatha crossed the yard and stood facing the towering figure of Kali, at whose feet a tiny lamp blinked. Her smile seemed a plastic and moving thing, as she regarded the man before her.

Draped across her outstretched hand, looped once about the point of her dagger, lay a crimson strangling cord.

Tathagatha smiled back at her, and she seemed almost to frown at that moment.

"It is a resignation, my dear," he stated. "You have lost this round."

She seemed to nod in agreement.

"I am pleased to have achieved such a height of recognition in so short a period of time," he continued. "But even if you had succeeded, old girl, it would have done you little good. It is too late now. I have started something which you cannot undo. Too many have heard the ancient words. You had thought they were lost, and so did I. But we were both wrong. The religion by which you rule is very ancient, goddess, but my protest is also that of a venerable tradition. So call me a protestant, and remember—now I am more than a man.

"Good night."

He left the Temple and the shrine of Kali, where the eyes of Yama had been fixed upon his back.

It was many months before the miracle occurred, and when it did, it did not seem a miracle, for it had grown up slowly about them.

Rild, who had come out of the north as the winds of spring blew across the land, wearing death upon his arm and the black fire within his eyes—Rild, of the white brows and pointed ears—spoke one afternoon, after the spring had passed, when the long days of summer hung warm beneath the Bridge of the Gods. He spoke, in that unexpected baritone, to answer a question asked him by a traveler.

The man asked him a second question, and then a third.

He continued to speak, and some of the other monks and several pilgrims gathered about him. The time following the questions, which now came from all of them, grew longer and longer, for his answers became parables, examples, allegories.

Then they were seated at his feet, and his dark eyes became strange pools, and his voice came down as from Heaven, clear and soft, melodic and persuasive.

They listened, and then the travelers went their way. But they met and spoke with other travelers upon the road, so that before the summer had passed, pilgrims coming to the purple grove were asking to meet this disciple of the Buddha and to hear his words also.

Tathagatha shared the preach-

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ing with him. Together, they taught of the Way of the Eightfold Path, the glory of Nirvana, the illusion of the world, and the chains that the world lays upon a man.

And then there were times when even the soft-spoken Tathagatha listened to the words of his disciple, who had digested all of the things Tathagatha had preached, had meditated long and fully upon them, and now, as though he had found entrance to a secret sea, dipped with his steel-hard hand into places of hidden waters and then sprinkled a thing of truth and beauty upon the heads of the hearers.

Summer passed. There was no doubt now that there were two who had received enlightenment: Tathagatha and his small disciple, whom they called Sugata. It was even said that Sugata was a healer and that when his eyes shone strangely and the icy touch of his hands came upon a twisted limb, that limb grew straight again. It was said that a blind man's vision had suddenly returned to him during one of Sugata's sermons.

There were two things in which Sugata believed: the Way of Salvation and Tathagatha, the Buddha.

"Illustrious One," he said to him one day, "my life was empty until you revealed to me the True Path. When you received your enlightenment, before you began your teaching, was it like a rush of fire and the roaring of water and you everywhere and a part of everything? —the clouds and the trees, the animals in the forest, all people, the snow on the mountaintop, and the bones in the field?"

"Yes," said Tathagatha.

"I, also, know the joy of all things," said Sugata.

"Yes, I know," said Tathagatha.

"I see now why once you said that all things come to you. To have brought such a doctrine into the world—I can see why the gods were envious. Poor gods! They are to be pitied. But you know. You know all things."

Tathagatha did not reply.

When the winds of spring blew again across the land, the year having gone full cycle since the arrival of the second Buddha, there came one day from out of the heavens a fearful shrieking.

The citizens of Alundil turned out into their streets to stare up at the sky. The Sudras in the fields put by their work and looked upwards. In the great Temple on the hill there was a sudden silence. In the purple grove beyond the town, the monks turned their heads.

It paced the heavens, the one who was born to rule the wind . . .

From out of the north it came—green and red, yellow and brown . . .

Its glide was a dance, its way was the air . . .

There came another shriek, and

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then the beating of mighty pinions as it climbed past clouds to become a tiny dot of black—

. . . And then it fell, like a meteor, bursting into flame, all of its colors blazing and burning bright, as it grew and grew, beyond all belief that anything could live at that size, that pace, that magnificence . . .

Half-spirit, half-bird, legend darkening the sky . . .

Mount of Vishnu, whose beak smashes chariots . . .

The Garuda Bird circled above Alundil.

Circled, and passed beyond the hills of rock which stood behind the city.

"Garuda!" The word ran through the town, the fields, the Temple, the grove.

If he did not fly alone, it was known that only a god could use the Garuda Bird for a mount.

There was silence. After those shrieks and that thunder of pinions, voices seemed naturally to drop to a whisper.

The Enlightened One stood upon the road before the grove, his monks moving about him, facing in the direction of the hills of rock.

Sugata came to his side and stood there.

"It was but a spring ago . . ." he said.

Tathagatha nodded.

"Rild failed," said Sugata. "What new thing comes from Heaven?"

The Buddha shrugged.

"I fear for you, my teacher," he said. "In all my lifetimes, you have been my only friend. Your teaching has given me peace. Why can they not leave you alone? You are the most harmless of men, and your doctrine the gentlest. What ill could you possibly bear them?"

The other turned away.

At that moment, with a mighty beating of the air and a jagged cry from its opened beak, the Garuda Bird rose once more above the hills. This time, it did not circle over the town, but climbed to a great height in the heavens and swept off to the north. Such was the speed of its passing, that it was gone in a matter of moments.

"Its passenger has dismounted and remains," suggested Sugata.

The Buddha walked within the purple grove.

He came from beyond the hills of stone, walking.

He came to a passing place through stone, and he followed this trail, his red leather boots silent on the rocky path.

Ahead, there was a sound of running water, from where a small stream cut across his way. Shrugging his blood-bright cloak back over his shoulders, he advanced upon a bend in the trail, the ruby head of his scimitar gleaming in his crimson sash.

Rounding a corner of stone, he came to a halt.

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One waited ahead, standing beside the log which led across the stream.

His eyes narrowed for an instant, then he moved forward again.

It was a small man who stood there, wearing the dark garments of a pilgrim, caught about with a leather harness from which was suspended a short, curved blade of bright steel. This man's head was closely shaven, save for a small lock of white hair. His eyebrows were white above eyes that were dark, and his skin was pale; his ears appeared to be pointed.

The traveler raised his hand and spoke to this man, saying, "Good afternoon, pilgrim."

The man did not reply, but moved to bar his way, positioning himself before the log which led across the stream.

"Pardon me, good pilgrim, but I am about to cross here, and you are making my passage difficult," he stated.

"You are mistaken, Lord Yama, if you think you are about to pass here," replied the other.

The One in Red smiled, showing a long row of even, white teeth.

"It is always a pleasure to be recognized," he acknowledged, "even by one who conveys misinformation concerning other matters."

"I do not fence with words," said the man in black.

"Oh?" The other raised his eyebrows in an expression of exaggerated inquiry. "With what then do you fence, sir? Surely not that piece of bent metal you bear."

"None other."

"I took it for some barbarous prayer-stick at first. I understand that this is a region fraught with strange cults and primitive sects. For a moment, I took you to be a devotee of some such superstition. But if, as you say, it is indeed a weapon, then I trust you are familiar with its use?"

"Somewhat," replied the man.

"Good, then," said Yama, "for I dislike having to kill a man who does not know what it is about. I feel obligated to point out to you, however, that when you stand before the Highest for judgment, you will be accounted a suicide."

The other smiled faintly.

"Any time that you are ready, deathgod, I will facilitate the passage of your spirit from out of its fleshy envelope."

"One more item only, then," said Yama, "and I shall put a quick end to conversation: give me a name to tell the priests, so that they shall know for whom they offer the rites."

"I renounced my final name but a short while back," answered the other. "For this reason, Kali's consort must take his death from one who is nameless."

"Rild, you are a fool," said Yama, and drew his blade.

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The man in black drew his.

". . . And it is fitting that you go unnamed to your doom. You betrayed your goddess."

"Life is full of betrayals," replied the other, before he struck. "By opposing you now and in this manner, I also betray the teachings of my new master. But I must follow the dictates of my heart. Neither my old name nor my new do therefore fit me, nor are they deserved—so call me by no name!"

Then his blade was fire, leaping everywhere, clicking, blazing . . .

Yama fell back before this onslaught, giving ground foot by foot, moving only his wrist as he parried the blows which fell about him.

Then, after he had retreated ten paces, he stood his ground and would not be moved. His parries widened slightly, but his ripostes came more sudden now and were interspersed with feints and unexpected attacks.

They swaggered blades till their perspiration fell upon the ground in showers, and then Yama began to press the attack, slowly, forcing his opponent into a retreat. Step by step, he recovered the ten paces he had given.

When they stood again upon the ground where the first blow had been struck, Yama acknowledged, over the clashing of steel: "Well have you learned your lessons, Rild! Better even than I had thought! Congratulations!"

As he spoke, his opponent wove his blade through an elaborate double feint and scored a light touch which cut his shoulder, drawing blood which immediately merged with the color of his garment.

At this, Yama sprang forward, beating down the other's guard, and delivered a blow to the side of his neck which might have decapitated an ordinary man.

The man in black raised his guard, shaking his head, parried another attack, and thrust forward, to be parried again himself.

"So, the death bath collars your throat," said Yama. "I'll seek entrance elsewhere, then," and his blade sang a faster song, as he tried for a lowline thrust.

Yama unleashed the full fury of that blade, backed by the centuries and the masters of many ages. Yet, the other met his attacks, parrying wider and wider, retreating faster and faster now, but still managing to hold him off as he backed away, counterthrusting as he went.

He retreated until his back was to the stream. Then Yama slowed and made comment:

"Half a century ago," he stated, "when you were my pupil for a brief time, I said to myself: 'This one has within him the makings of a master.' Nor was I wrong, Rild. You are perhaps the greatest swordsman raised up in all the ages I can remember. I can almost forgive apostasy when I witness your skill."

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He feinted then a chest cut, and at the last instant moved around the parry so that he lay the edge of his weapon high upon the other's wrist.

Leaping backwards, parrying wildly and cutting at Yama's head, the man in black came into a position at the head of the log which lay above the crevice that led down to the stream.

"Your hand, too, Rild! Indeed, the goddess is lavish with her protection. Try this!"

The steel screeched as he caught it in a bind, nicking the other's bicep as he passed about the blade.

"Aha! There's a place she missed!" he cried. "Let's try for another!"

Their blades bound and disengaged, feinted, thrust, parried, riposted . . . .

Yama met an elaborate attack with a stop-thrust, his longer blade again drawing blood from his opponent's upper arm.

The man in black stepped up upon the log, swinging a vicious head-cut which Yama beat away. Pressing the attack then even harder, Yama forced him to back out upon the log, and then he kicked at its side.

The other jumped backward, landing upon the opposite bank. As soon as his feet touched ground, he too kicked out, causing the log to move.

It rolled before Yama could mount it, slipping free of the banks, crashing down into the stream, bobbing about for a moment, and then following the water-trail westward.

"I'd say it is only a seven- or eight-foot jump, Yama! Come on across!" cried the other.

The deathgod smiled.

"Catch your breath quickly now, while you may," he stated. "Breath is the least appreciated gift of the gods. None sing hymns to it, praising the good air, breathed by king and beggar, master and dog alike. But, oh, to be without it! Appreciate each breath, Rild, as though it were your last—for that one, too, is near at hand!"

"You are said to be wise in these matters, Yama," said the one who had been called Rild and Sugata. "You are said to be a god, whose kingdom is death and whose knowledge extends beyond the ken of mortals. I would question you, therefore, while we are standing idle."

Yama did not smile his mocking smile, as he had to all his opponent's previous statements. This one had a touch of ritual about it.

"What is it that you wish to know? I grant you the death-boon of a question."

Then, in the ancient words of the Katha Upanishad, the one who had been called Rild and Sugata chanted:

" 'There is doubt concerning a man when he is dead. Some say he still exists. Others say he does not.

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This thing I should like to know, taught by you.' "

Yama replied with the ancient words: " 'On this subject even the gods have their doubts. It is not easy to understand, for the nature of the *atman* is a subtle thing. Ask me another question. Release me from this boon!' "

" 'Forgive me if it is foremost in my mind, oh Death, but another teacher such as yourself cannot be found, and surely there is no other boon which I crave more at this moment.' "

" 'Keep your life and go your way,' " said Yama, plunging his blade again into his sash. " 'I release you from your doom. Choose sons and grandsons; choose elephants, horses, herds of cattle, and gold. Choose any other boon—fair maidens, chariots, musical instruments. I shall give them unto you and they shall wait upon you. But ask me not of death.' "

" 'Oh Death,' " sang the other, " 'these endure only till tomorrow. Keep your maidens, horses, dances, and songs for yourself. No boon will I accept but the one which I have asked: Tell me, oh Death, of that which lies beyond life, of which men and the gods have their doubts.' "

Yama stood very still, and he did not continue the poem.

"Very well, Rild," he said, his eyes locking with the other's, "but it is not a kingdom subject to words. I must show you."

They stood, so, for a moment, and then the man in black swayed. He threw his arm across his face, covering his eyes, and a single sob escaped his throat.

When this occurred, Yama drew his cloak from his shoulders and cast it like a net across the stream.

Weighted at the hems for such a maneuver it fell, net-like, upon his opponent.

As he struggled to free himself, the man in black heard rapid footfalls and then a crash, as Yama's blood-red boots struck upon his side of the stream. Casting aside the cloak and raising his guard, he parried Yama's new attack. The ground behind him sloped upwards, and he backed further and further, to where it steepened, so that Yama's head was no higher than his belt. He then struck down at his opponent. Yama slowly fought his way uphill.

"Deathgod, deathgod," he chanted, "forgive my presumptuous question, and tell me you did not lie."

"Soon you shall know," said Yama, cutting at his legs.

Yama struck a blow which would have run another man through, cleaving his heart. But it glanced off his opponent's breast.

When he came to a place where the ground was broken, the small man kicked, again and again, sending showers of dirt and gravel down upon his opponent. Yama

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shielded his eyes with his left hand, but then larger pieces of stone began to rain down upon him. These rolled on the ground, and as several came beneath his boots, he lost his footing and fell, slipping backwards down the slope. The other kicked at heavy rocks then, even dislodging a boulder and following it downhill, his blade held high.

Unable to catch his footing in time to meet the attack, Yama rolled and slid back toward the stream. He managed to brake himself at the edge of the crevice, but he saw the boulder coming and tried to draw back out of its way. As he pushed at the ground his blade fell into the water below.

With his dagger, which he drew as he sprang into a stumbling crouch, he managed to parry the high cut of the other's blade. The boulder splashed into the stream.

Then his left hand shot forward, seizing the wrist which had guided that blade. He slashed upwards with the dagger and felt his own wrist taken.

They stood then, locking their strength, until Yama sat down and rolled to his side, thrusting the other from him.

Still, both locks held, and they continued to roll from the force of that thrust. Then the edge of the crevice was beside them, beneath them, above them.

He felt the blade go out of his hand as it struck the stream-bed.

When they came again above the surface of the water, gasping for breath, both held only water in their hands.

"Time for the final baptism," said Yama, and he lashed out with his left hand.

The other blocked the punch, throwing one of his own.

They moved to the left with the waters until their feet struck upon rock, and they fought, wading, along the length of the stream.

It widened and grew more shallow as they moved, until the waters swirled about their waists. In places, the banks began to fall nearer the surface of the water.

Yama landed blow after blow, both with his fists and the edges of his hands, but it was as if he assailed a statue, for the one who had been Kali's holy executioner took each blow without changing his expression, and he returned them with twisting punches of bone-breaking force. Most of these blows were slowed by the water or blocked by Yama's guard, but one landed between his rib cage and hip bone, and another glanced off his left shoulder and rebounded from his cheek.

Yama cast himself into a backstroke and made for shallower water.

The other followed and sprang upon him, to be caught in his impervious midsection by a red boot, as the front of his garment was jerked forward and down. He

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continued on, passing over Yama's head, to land upon his back on a section of shale.

Yama rose to his knees and turned, as the other found his footing and drew a dagger from his belt. His face was still impassive as he dropped into a crouch.

For a moment their eyes met, but the other did not waver this time.

"Now can I meet your death-gaze, Yama," he stated, "and not be stopped by it. You have taught me too well!"

And as he lunged, Yama's hands came away from his waist, snapping his wet sash like a whip about the other's legs.

He caught him and locked him to him as he fell forward, dropping the blade, and with a kick, he bore them both back into deeper water.

"None sing hymns to breath," said Yama. "But, oh to be without it!"

Then he plunged downward, bearing the other with him, his arms like steel loops about his body.

Later, much later, as the wet figure stood beside the stream, he spoke softly and his breath came in gasps:

"You were—the greatest—to be raised up against me—in all the ages I can remember . . . It is indeed a pity . . ."

Then, having crossed the stream, he continued on his way through the hills of stone, walking.

Entering the town of Alundil, the traveler stopped at the first inn he came to. He took a room and ordered a tub of water. He bathed while a servant cleaned his garments.

Before he had his dinner, he moved to the window and looked down into the street. The smell of slizzard was strong upon the air, and the babble of many voices arose from below.

People were leaving the town. In the courtyard at his back, preparations for the departure of a morning caravan were being made. This night marked the end of the spring festival. Below him in the street, businessmen were still trading, mothers were soothing tired children, and a local prince was returning with his men from the hunt, two fire-roosters strapped to the back of a skittering slizzard. He watched a tired prostitute discussing something with a priest, who appeared to be even more tired, as he kept shaking his head and finally walked away. One moon was already high in the heavens—seen as golden through the Bridge of the Gods—and a second, smaller moon had just appeared above the horizon. There was a cool tingle in the evening air, bearing to him, above the smells of the city, the scents of the growing things of spring: the small shoots

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and the tender grasses, the clean smell of the blue-green spring wheat, the moist ground, the roiling freshet. Leaning forward, he could see the Temple that stood upon the hill.

He summoned a servant to bring him dinner in his chamber and to send for a local merchant.

He ate slowly, not paying special attention to his food, and when he had finished, the merchant was shown in.

The man bore a cloak full of samples, and of these he finally decided upon a long, curved blade and a short, straight dagger, both of which he thrust into his sash.

Then he went out into the evening and walked along the rutted main street of the town. Lovers embraced in doorways. He passed a house where mourners were wailing for one dead. A beggar limped after him for half a block, until he turned and glanced into his eyes, saying: "You are not lame," and then the man hurried away, losing himself in a crowd that was passing. Overhead, the fireworks began to burst against the sky, sending long, cherry-colored streamers down toward the ground. From the Temple, came the sound of the gourd horns playing the *nagaswaram* music. A man stumbled from out a doorway, brushing against him, and he broke the man's wrist as he felt his hand fall upon his purse. The man uttered a curse and called for help, but he pushed him into the drainage ditch and walked on, turning away his two companions with one dark look.

At last, he came to the Temple, hesitated a moment, and passed within.

He entered the inner courtyard behind a priest who was bearing in a small statue from an outer niche.

He surveyed the courtyard, then quickly moved to the place occupied by the statue of the goddess Kali. He studied her for a long while, drawing his blade and placing it at her feet. When he picked it up and turned away, he saw that the priest was watching him. He nodded to the man, who immediately approached and bade him a good evening.

"Good evening, priest," he replied.

"May Kali sanctify your blade, warrior."

"Thank you. She has."

The priest smiled.

"You speak as if you knew that for certain."

"And that is presumptuous of me, eh?"

"Well, it may not be in the best of taste."

"Nevertheless, I felt her power come over me as I gazed upon her shrine."

The priest shuddered.

"Despite my office," he stated, "that is a feeling of power I can do without."

"You fear her power?"

"Let us say," said the priest, "that

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despite its magnificence, the shrine of Kali is not so frequently visited as are those of Lakshmi, Sarasvati, Shakti, Sitala, Ratri, and the other less awesome goddesses."

"But she is greater than any of these."

". . . And more terrible."

"So? Despite her strength, she is not an unjust goddess."

The priest smiled.

"What man who has lived for more than a score of years desires justice, warrior? For my part, I find mercy infinitely more attractive. Give me a forgiving deity any day."

"Well taken," said the other, "but I am, as you say, a warrior. My own nature is close to hers. We think alike, the goddess and I. We generally agree on most matters. When we do not, I remember that she is also a woman."

"I live here," said the priest, "and I do not speak that intimately of my charges, the gods."

"In public, that is," said the other. "Tell me not of priests. I have drunk with many of you, and know you to be as blasphemous as the rest of mankind."

"There is a time and place for everything," said the priest, glancing back at Kali's statue.

"Aye, aye. Now tell me why the base of Yama's shrine has not been scrubbed recently. It is dusty."

"It was cleaned but yesterday, but so many have passed before it since then that it has felt considerable usage."

The other smiled.

"Why then are there no offerings laid at his feet, no remains of sacrifices?"

"No one gives flowers to Death," said the priest. "They just come to look and go away. We priests have always felt the two statues to be well-situated. They make a terrible pair, do they not? Death, and the mistress of destruction?"

"A mighty team," said the other. "But do you mean to tell me that no one makes sacrifice to Yama? No one at all?"

"Other than we priests, when the calendar of devotions requires it, and an occasional townsman, when a loved one is upon the deathbed and has been refused direct incarnation—other than these, no, I have never seen sacrifice made to Yama, simply, sincerely, with good will or affection."

"He must feel offended."

"Not so, warrior. For are not all living things, in themselves, sacrifices to Death?"

"Indeed, you speak truly. What need has he for their good will or affection? Gifts are unnecessary, for he takes what he wants."

"Like Kali," acknowledged the priest. "And in the cases of both deities have I often sought justification for atheism. Unfortunately, they manifest themselves too strongly in the world for their existence to be denied effectively. Pity."

The warrior laughed.

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"A priest who is an unwilling believer! I like that. It tickles my funny bone! Here, buy yourself a barrel of soma—for sacrificial purposes."

"Thank you, warrior. I shall. Join me in a small libation now—on the Temple?"

"By Kali, I will!" said the other. "But a small one only."

He accompanied the priest into the central building and down a flight of stairs into the cellar, where a barrel of soma was tapped and two beakers drawn.

"To your health and long life," he said, raising it.

"To your morbid patrons: Yama and Kali," said the priest.

"Thank you."

They gulped the potent brew, and the priest drew two more.

"To warm your throat against the night."

"Very good."

"It is a good thing to see some of these travelers depart," said the priest. "Their devotions have enriched the Temple, but they have also tired the staff considerably."

"To the departure of the pilgrims!"

"To the departure of the pilgrims!"

They drank again.

"I thought that most of them came to see the Buddha," said Yama.

"That is true," replied the priest, "but on the other hand, they are not anxious to antagonize the gods by this. So, before they visit the purple grove, they generally make sacrifice or donate to the Temple for prayers."

"What do you know of the one called Tathagatha, and of his teachings?"

The other looked away.

"I am a priest of the gods and a Brahmin, warrior. I do not wish to speak of this one."

"So, he has gotten to you, too?"

"Enough! I have made my wishes known to you. It is not a subject on which I will discourse."

"It matters not—and will matter less shortly. Thank you for the soma. Good evening, priest."

"Good evening, warrior. May the gods smile upon your path."

"And yours also."

Mounting the stairs, he departed the Temple and continued on his way through the city, walking.

When he came to the purple grove, there were three moons in the heavens, small camplights behind the trees, pale blossoms of fire in the sky above the town, and a breeze with a certain dampness in it stirring the growth about him.

He moved silently ahead, entering the grove.

When he came into the lighted area, he was faced with row upon row of motionless, seated figures. Each wore a yellow robe with a yellow cowl drawn over the head. Hundreds of them were seated so, and not one uttered a sound.

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He approached the one nearest him.

"I have come to see Tathagatha, the Buddha," he said.

The man did not seem to hear him.

"Where is he?"

The man did not reply.

He bent forward and stared into the monk's half-closed eyes. For a moment, he glared into them, but it was as though the other were asleep, for the eyes did not even meet with his.

Then he raised his voice, so that all within the grove might hear him:

"I have come to see Tathagatha, the Buddha," he said. "Where is he?"

It was as though he addressed a field of stones.

"Do you think to hide him in this manner?" he called out. "Do you think that because you are many, and all dressed alike, and because you will not answer me, that for these reasons I cannot find him among you?"

There was only the sighing of the wind, passing through from the back of the grove. The light flickered and the purple fronds stirred.

He laughed.

"In this, you may be right," he admitted. "But you must move sometime, if you intend to go on living—and I can wait as long as any man."

Then he seated himself upon the ground, his back against the blue bark of a tall tree, his blade across his knees.

Immediately, he was seized with drowsiness. His head nodded and jerked upward several times. Then his chin came to rest upon his breast and he snored.

. . . Was walking, across a blue-green plain, the grasses bending down to form a pathway before him. At the end of this pathway was a massive tree, a tree such as did not grow upon the world, but rather held the world together with its roots, and with its branches reached [illegible] utter leaves among the stars.

At its base sat a man, cross-legged, a faint smile upon his lips. He knew this man to be the Buddha, and he approached and stood before him.

"Greetings, oh Death," said the seated one, crowned with a rose-hued aureole that was bright in the shadow of the tree.

Yama did not reply, but drew his blade.

The Buddha continued to smile, and as Yama moved forward he heard distant music.

He halted and looked about him, his blade still upraised.

They came from all quarters, the four Regents of the world, come down from Mount Sumernu: the Master of the North advanced, followed by his Yakshas, all in gold, mounted on yellow horses, bearing shields that blazed with

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golden light; the Angel of the South came on, followed by his hosts, the Kumbhandas, mounted upon blue steeds and bearing sapphire shields; from the East rode the Regent whose horsemen carry shields of pearl and who are clad all in silver; and from the West there came the One whose Nagas mounted blood-red horses, were clad all in red, and held before them shields of coral. Their hooves did not appear to touch the grasses, and the only sound in the air was the music, which grew louder.

"Why do the Regents of the world approach?" Yama found himself saying.

"They come to bear my bones away," replied the Buddha, still smiling.

The four Regents drew rein, their hordes at their backs, and Yama faced them.

"You come to bear his bones away," said Yama, "but who will come for yours?"

"You may not have this man, oh Death," said the Master of the North, "for he belongs to the world, and we of the world will defend him."

"Hear me, Regents who dwell upon Sumernu," said Yama, taking his Aspect upon him. "Into your hands is given the keeping of the world, but Death takes whom he will from out the world, and whenever he chooses. It is not given to you to dispute my Attributes, nor the ways of their working."

The four Regents moved to a position between Yama and Tathagatha.

"We do dispute your way with this one, Lord Yama. For in his hands he holds the destiny of our world. You may touch him only after having overthrown the four Powers."

"So be it," said Yama. "Which among you will be first to oppose me?"

"I will," said the speaker, drawing his golden blade.

Yama, his Aspect upon him, sheared through the soft metal like butter and laid the flat of his scimitar along the Regent's head, sending him sprawling upon the ground.

A great cry came up from the ranks of the Yakshas, and two of the golden horsemen came forward to bear away their leader. Then they turned their mounts and rode back into the North.

"Who is next?"

The Regent of the East came before him, bearing a straight blade of silver and a net woven of moonbeams.

"I," he said, and he cast with the net.

Yama set his foot upon it, caught it in his fingers, and jerked the other off balance. As the Regent stumbled forward, he reversed his blade and struck him in the jaw with its pommel.

Two silver warriors glared at him, then dropped their eyes, as

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they bore their Master away to the East, a discordant music trailing in their wake.

"Next!" said Yama.

Then there came before him the burly leader of the Nagas, who threw down his weapons and stripped off his tunic, saying, "I will wrestle with you, deathgod."

Yama laid his weapons aside and removed his upper garments.

All the while this was happening, the Buddha sat in the shade of the great tree, smiling, as though the passage of arms meant nothing to him.

The Chief of the Nagas caught Yama behind the neck with his left hand, pulling his head forward. Yama did the same to him, and the other did then twist his body, casting his right arm over Yama's left shoulder and behind his neck, locking it then tight about his head, which he now drew down hard against his hip, turning his body as he dragged the other forward.

Reaching up behind the Naga Chief's back, Yama caught his left shoulder in his left hand and then moved his right hand behind the Regent's knees, so that he lifted both his legs from off the ground while drawing back upon his shoulder.

For a moment he held this one cradled in his arms like a child, then raised him up to shoulder level and dropped away his arms.

When the Regent struck the ground, Yama fell upon him with his knees and rose again. The other did not.

When the riders of the West had departed, only the Angel of the South, clad all in blue, stood before the Buddha.

"And you?" asked the deathgod, raising his weapons again.

"I will not take up weapons of steel or leather or stone, as a child takes up toys, to face you, god of death. Nor will I match the strength of my body against yours," said the Angel. "I know I will be bested if I do these things, for none may dispute you with arms."

"Then climb back upon your blue stallion and ride away," said Yama, "if you will not fight."

The Angel did not answer, but cast his blue shield into the air, so that it spun like a wheel of sapphire, growing larger and larger as it hung above them.

Then it fell to the ground and began to sink into it, without a sound, still growing as it vanished from sight, the grasses coming together again above the spot where it had struck.

"And what does that signify?" asked Yama.

"I do not actively contest. I merely defend. Mine is the power of passive opposition. Mine is the power of life, as yours is the power of death. While you can destroy anything I send against you, you cannot destroy everything, oh Death. Mine is the power of the

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shield, but not the sword. Life will oppose you, Lord Yama, to defend your victim."

The Blue One turned then, mounted his blue steed, and rode into the South, the Kumbhandas at his back. The sound of the music did not go with him, but remained in the air he had occupied.

Yama advanced once more, his blade in his hand.

"Their efforts came to naught," he said. "Your time is come."

He struck forward with his blade.

The blow did not land, however, as a branch from the great tree fell between them and struck the scimitar from his grasp.

He reached for it, and the grasses bent to cover it over, weaving themselves into a tight, unbreakable net.

Cursing, he drew his dagger and struck again.

One mighty branch bent down, came swaying before his target, so that his blade was imbedded deeply in its fibers. Then the branch lashed again skyward, carrying the weapon with it, high out of reach.

The Buddha's eyes were closed in meditation, and his halo glowed in the shadows.

Yama took a step forward, raising his hands, and the grasses knotted themselves about his ankles, holding him where he stood.

He struggled for a moment, tugging at their unyielding roots. Then he stopped and raised both hands high, throwing his head far back, death leaping from his eyes.

"Hear me, oh Powers!" he cried. "From this moment forward, this spot shall bear the curse of Yama! No living thing shall ever stir again upon this ground! No bird shall sing, nor snake slither here! It shall be barren and stark, a place of rocks and shifting sand! Not a spear of grass shall ever be upraised from here against the sky! I speak this curse and lay this doom upon the defenders of my enemy!"

The grasses began to wither, but before they had released him, there came a great splintering, cracking noise, as the tree whose roots held together the world and in whose branches the stars were caught, as fish in a net, swayed forward, splitting down its middle, its uppermost limbs tearing apart the sky, its roots opening chasms in the ground, its leaves falling like blue-green rain about him. A massive section of its trunk toppled toward him.

In the distance, he still saw the Buddha, seated in meditation, as though unaware of the chaos which erupted about him.

Then there was only blackness and a sound like the crashing of thunder . . .

Yama jerked his head, his eyes springing open.

He sat in the purple grove, his back against the bole of a blue tree, his blade across his knees.

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Nothing seemed to have changed.

The rows of monks were seated, as in meditation, before him. The breeze was still cool and moist, and the lights still flickered as it passed.

Yama stood, knowing then, somehow, where he must go to find that which he sought.

He moved past the monks, following a well-beaten path which led far into the interior of the wood.

He came upon a purple pavilion, but it was empty.

He moved on, tracing the path back to where the wood became a wilderness. Here, the ground was damp and a faint mist sprang up about him. But the way was still clear before him, illuminated by the light of the three moons.

The trail led downward, the blue and purple trees growing shorter and more twisted here than they did above. Small pools of water, with floating patches of leprous, silver scum, began to appear at the sides of the trail. A marshland smell came to his nostrils, and the wheezing of strange creatures came out of clumps of brush.

He heard the sound of singing, coming from far up behind him, and he realized that the monks he had left were now awake and stirring about the grove. They had finished with the task of combining their thoughts to force upon him the vision of their leader's invincibility. Their chanting was probably a signal, reaching out to—

There!

He was seated upon a rock in the middle of a field, the moonlight falling full upon him.

Yama drew his blade and advanced.

When he was about twenty paces away, the other turned his head.

"Greetings, oh Death," he said.

"Greetings, Tathagatha."

"Tell me why you are here."

"It has been decided that the Buddha must die."

"That does not answer my question, however. Why have you come here?"

"Are you not the Buddha?"

"I have been called Buddha, and Tathagatha, and the Enlightened One, and many other things. But, in answer to your question: no, I am not the Buddha. You have already succeeded in what you set out to do. You slew the real Buddha this day."

"My memory must indeed be growing weak, for I confess that I do not remember doing this thing."

"The real Buddha was named by us Sugata," replied the other. "Before that, he was known as Rild."

"Rild!" Yama chuckled. "You are trying to tell me that he was more than an executioner whom you talked out of doing his job?"

"Many people are executioners who have been talked out of doing their jobs," replied the one on the rock. "Rild gave up his mission willingly and became a follower of

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the Way. He was the only man I ever knew to really achieve enlightenment."

"Is this not a pacifistic religion, this thing you have been spreading?"

"Yes."

Yama threw back his head and laughed.

"Gods! Then it is well you are not preaching a militant one! Your foremost disciple, enlightenment and all, nearly had my head this afternoon!"

A tired look came over the Buddha's wide countenance.

"Do you think he could actually have beaten you?"

Yama was silent a moment, then, "No," he said.

"Do you think he knew this?"

"Perhaps," Yama replied.

"Did you not know one another prior to this day's meeting? Have you not seen one another at practice?"

"Yes," said Yama. "We were acquainted."

"Then he knew your skill and realized the outcome of the encounter."

Yama was silent.

"He went willingly to his martyrdom, unknown to me at the time. I do not feel that he went with real hope of beating you."

"Why, then?"

"To prove a point."

"What point could he hope to prove in such a manner?"

"I do not know. I only know that it must be as I have said, for I knew him. I have listened too often to his sermons, to his subtle parables, to believe that he would do a thing such as this without a purpose. You have slain the true Buddha, deathgod. You know what *I* am."

"Siddhartha," said Yama, "I know that you are a fraud. I know that you are not an Enlightened One. I realize that your doctrine is a thing which could have been remembered by any among the First. You chose to resurrect it, pretending to be its originator. You decided to spread it, in hopes of raising an opposition to the religion by which the true gods rule. I admire the effort. It was cleverly planned and executed. But your biggest mistake, I feel, is that you picked a pacifistic creed with which to oppose an active one. I am curious why you did this thing, when there were so many more appropriate religions from which to choose."

"Perhaps I was just curious to see how such a counter-current would flow," replied the other.

"No, Sam, that is not it," answered Yama. "I feel it is only part of a larger plan you have laid, and that for all these years—while you pretended to be a saint and preached sermons in which you did not truly believe yourself—you have been making other plans. An army, great in space, may offer opposition in a brief span of time. One man, brief in space, must

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spread his opposition across a period of many years if he is to have a chance of succeeding. You are aware of this, and now that you have sown the seeds of this stolen creed, you are planning to move on to another phase of opposition. You are trying to be a one-man antithesis to Heaven, opposing the will of the gods across the years, in many ways and from behind many masks. But it will end here."

"Why, Yama?" he asked.

"It was considered quite carefully," said Yama. "We did not want to make you a martyr, encouraging more than ever the growth of this thing you have been teaching. On the other hand, if you were not stopped, it would still continue to grow. It was decided, therefore, that you must meet your end at the hands of an agent of Heaven —thus showing which religion is the stronger. So, martyr or no, Buddhism will be a second-rate religion henceforth. That is why you must now die the real death."

"When I asked 'Why?' I meant something different. You have answered the wrong question. I meant, why have *you* come to do this thing, Yama? Why have you, master of arms, master of sciences, come as lackey to a crew of drunken body-changers, who are not qualified to polish your blade or wash out your test tubes? Why do you, who might be the freest spirit of us all, demean yourself by serving your inferiors?"

"For that, your death shall not be a clean one."

"Why? I did but ask a question, which must have long since passed through more minds than my own. I did not take offense when you called me a false Buddha. I know what I am. Who are you, death-god?"

Yama placed his blade within his sash and withdrew a pipe which he had purchased at the inn earlier in the day. He filled its bowl with tobacco, lit it, and smoked.

"It is obvious that we must talk a little longer, if only to clear both our minds of questions," he stated, "so I may as well be comfortable." He seated himself upon a low rock. "First, a man may in some ways be superior to his fellows and still serve them, if together they serve a common cause which is greater than any one man. I believe that I serve such a cause, or I would not be doing it. I take it that you feel the same way concerning what you do, or you would not put up with this life of miserable asceticism— though I note that you are not so gaunt as your followers. You were offered godhood some years ago in Mahartha, as I recall, and you mocked Brahma, raided the Palace of Karma, and filled all the prayer-machines of the city with slugs—"

The Buddha chuckled. Yama joined him briefly and continued:

"There are no Accelerationists remaining in the world, other than yourself. It is a dead issue, which

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should never have become an issue in the first place. I do have a certain respect for the manner in which you have acquitted yourself over the years. It has even occurred to me that if you could be made to realize the hopelessness of your present position, you might still be persuaded to join the hosts of Heaven. While I did come here to kill you, if you can be convinced of this now and give me your word upon it, promising to end your foolish fight, I will take it upon myself to vouch for you. I will take you back to the Celestial City with me, where you may now accept that which you once refused. They will harken to me; they need me."

"No," said Sam, "for I am not convinced of the futility of my position, and I fully intend to continue the show."

The chanting came down from the camp in the purple grove. One of the moons disappeared beyond the treetops.

"Why are your followers not beating the bushes, seeking to save you?"

"They would come if I called, but I will not call. I do not need to."

"Why did they cause me to dream that foolish dream?"

The Buddha shrugged.

"Why did they not arise and slay me as I slept?"

"It is not their way."

"You might have, though, eh? If you could get away with it? If none would know the Buddha did it?"

"Perhaps," said the other. "As you know, the personal strengths and weaknesses of a leader are no true indication of the merits of his cause."

Yama drew upon his pipe. The smoke wreathed his head and eddied away to join the fogs, which were now becoming more heavy upon the land.

"I know we are alone here, and you are unarmed," said Yama.

"We are alone here. My traveling gear is hidden further along my route."

"Your traveling gear?"

"I have finished here. You guessed correctly. I have begun what I set out to begin. After we have finished our conversation, I will depart."

Yama chuckled.

"The optimism of a revolutionary always gives rise to a sense of wonder. How do you propose to depart? On a magic carpet?"

"I shall go as other men go."

"That is rather condescending of you. Will the powers of the world rise up to defend you? I see no great tree to shelter you with its branches. There is no clever grass to seize at my feet. Tell me how you will achieve your departure?"

"I'd rather surprise you."

"What say we fight? I do not like to slaughter an unarmed man. If you actually do have supplies cached somewhere nearby, go fetch your blade. It is better than no chance at all. I've even heard it

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said that Lord Siddhartha was, in his day, a formidable swordsman."

"Thank you, no. Another time, perhaps. But not this time."

Yama drew once more upon his pipe, stretched, and yawned.

"I can think of no more questions then, which I wish to ask you. It is futile to argue with you. I have nothing more to say. Is there anything else that you would care to add to the conversation?"

"Yes," said Sam. "What's she like, that bitch Kali? There are so many different reports that I'm beginning to believe she is all things to all men—"

Yama hurled the pipe, which struck him upon the shoulder and sent a shower of sparks down his arm. His scimitar was a bright flash about his head as he leapt forward.

When he struck the sandy stretch before the rock, his motion was arrested. He almost fell, twisted himself perpendicular, and remained standing. He struggled, but could not move.

"Some quicksand," said Sam, "is quicker than other quicksand. Fortunately, you are settling into that of the slower sort. So you have considerable time yet remaining at your disposal. I would like to prolong the conversation, if I thought I had a chance of persuading you to join me. But I know that I do not—no more than you could persuade me to go to Heaven."

"I will get free," said Yama softly, not struggling. "I will get free somehow, and I will come after you again."

"Yes," said Sam, "I feel this to be true. In fact, in a short while I will instruct you how to go about it. For the moment, however, you are something every preacher longs for: a captive audience, representing the opposition. So, I have a brief sermon for you, Lord Yama."

Yama hefted his blade, decided against throwing it, thrust it again into his sash.

"Preach on," he said, and he succeeded in catching the other's eyes.

Sam swayed where he sat, but he spoke again:

"It is amazing," he said, "how that mutant brain of yours generated a mind capable of transferring its powers to any new brain you choose to occupy. It has been years since I last exercised my one ability, as I am at this moment—but it, too, behaves in a similar manner. No matter what body I inhabit, it appears that my power follows me into it also. I understand it is still that way with most of us. Sitala, I hear, can control temperatures for a great distance about her. When she assumes a new body, the power accompanies her into her new nervous system, though it comes only weakly at first. Agni, I know, can set fire to objects by staring at them for a period of time and willing that they burn. Now, take for example the deathgaze you are at this mo-

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ment turning upon me. Is it not amazing how you keep this gift about you in all times and places, over the centuries? I have often wondered as to the physiological basis for the phenomenon. Have you ever researched the area?"

"Yes," said Yama, his eyes burning beneath his dark brows.

"And what is the explanation? A person is born with an abnormal brain, his psyche is later transferred to a normal one, and yet his abnormal abilities are not destroyed in the transfer. Why does this thing happen?"

"Because you really have only one body-image, which is electrical as well as chemical in nature. It begins immediately to modify its new physiological environment. The new body has much about it which it treats rather like a disease, attempting to cure it into being the old body. If the body which you now inhabit were to be made physically immortal, it would someday come to resemble your original body."

"How interesting."

"That is why the transferred power is weak at first, but grows stronger as you continue occupancy. That is why it is best to cultivate an Attribute, and perhaps to employ mechanical aids, also."

"Well. That is something I have often wondered about. Thank you. By the way, keep trying with your deathgaze—it is painful, you know. So that is something, anyway. Now, as to the sermon: A proud and arrogant man, such as yourself—with an admittedly admirable quality of didacticism about him—was given to doing research in the area of a certain disfiguring and degenerative disease. One day he contracted it himself. Since he had not yet developed a cure for the condition, he did take time out to regard himself in a mirror and say: 'But on *me,* it does look good.' You are such a man, Yama. You will not attempt to fight your condition. Rather, you are proud of it. You betrayed yourself in your fury, so I know that I speak the truth when I say that the name of your disease is Kali. You would not give power into the hands of the unworthy if that woman did not bid you do it. I knew her of old, and I am certain that she has not changed. She cannot love a man. She cares only for those who bring her gifts of chaos. If ever you cease to suit her purposes, she will put you aside, deathgod. I do not say this because we are enemies, but rather as one man to another. I know. Believe me, I do. Perhaps it is unfortunate that you were never really young, Yama, and did not know your first love in the days of spring . . . The moral, therefore, of my sermon on this small mount is this: Even a mirror will not show you yourself, if you do not wish to see. Cross her once to try the truth of my words, even in a small matter, and see

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how quickly she responds, and in what fashion. What will you do if your own weapons are turned against you, Death?"

"You have finished speaking now?" asked Yama.

"That's about it. A sermon is a warning, and you have been warned."

"Whatever your power, Sam, I see that it is at this moment proof against my deathgaze. Consider yourself fortunate that I am weakened—"

"I do indeed, for my head is about to split. Damn your eyes!"

"One day I will try your power again, and even if it should still be proof against my own, you will fall on that day. If not by my Attribute, then by my blade."

"If that is a challenge, I choose to defer acceptance. I suggest that you do try my words before you attempt to make it good."

At this point, the sand was halfway up Yama's thighs.

Sam sighed and climbed down from his perch.

"There is only one clear path to this rock, and I am about to follow it away from here. Now, I will tell you how to gain your life, if you are not too proud. I have instructed the monks to come to my aid, here at this place, if they hear a cry for help. I told you earlier that I was not going to call for help, and that is true. If, however, you begin calling out for aid with that powerful voice of yours, they shall be here before you sink too much further. They will bring you safely to firm ground and will not try to harm you, for such is their way. I like the thought of the god of death being saved by the monks of Buddha. Good night, Yama, I'm going to leave you now."

Yama smiled.

"There will be another day, oh Buddha," he stated. "I can wait for it. Flee now as far and as fast as you can. The world is not large enough to hide you from my wrath. I will follow you, and I will teach you of the enlightenment which is pure hellfire."

"In the meantime," said Sam, "I suggest you solicit aid of my followers or learn the difficult art of mud-breathing."

He picked his way across the field, Yama's eyes burning into his back.

When he reached the trail, he turned. ". . . And you may want to mention in Heaven," he said, "that I was called out of town on a business deal."

Yama did not reply.

"I think I am going to make a deal for some weapons," he finished, "some rather special weapons. So when you come after me, bring your girl friend along. If she likes what she sees, she may persuade you to switch sides."

Then he struck the trail and moved away through the night, whistling, beneath a moon that was white and a moon that was golden.

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BOOKS

IS THERE INTELLIGENT LIFE ON Earth?

Yes.

The question is a chapter heading from Walter Sullivan's WE ARE NOT ALONE (*F & SF Books*, June 1965). The answer is based on two recent volumes of non-fiction which between them span the full topical spectrum of science-fantasy: the extra-galactic to the extra-sensory, dybbuks to Dyson spheres, laserphones to lycanthropy.

There are several things the two books have in common. Both are collaborations of an unlikely nature. Both are large, lavishly illustrated, carefully documented, and lucidly written. Each (though in mirror-image fashion) contains that essential interaction of knowledge, wisdom, and imagination (fact, formulation, fantasy—perception, insight, projection) which defines better than any rules of technique or topicality the (otherwise almost indefinable) *genre* to which this magazine, and this column, are committed.

In the opening pages of THE SUPERNATURAL* the authors define the scope of their investigation. "In everyday speech, 'supernatural' refers to anything that stretches or breaks or otherwise violates what we think of as the laws of nature. . . . By this definition, our title would be the second most inclusive that could be imagined, after 'nature'." Their own definition is less encyclopedic: ". . . those instincts and perceptions about the universe that make no sense in rational terms but . . . whose existence has been acknowledged by most people at most times" and "the stories and lore about such matters that can be found throughout the world."

From this range, they exclude in advance any direct examination of religion and mythology, except insofar as these are inseparable from other aspects. About half of the actual text is devoted to the history and current practice of magic and witchcraft in various forms; perhaps half that much space is given to "the supernatural beings . . . believed to inhabit darkness and the night . . .

*THE SUPERNATURAL, Douglas Hill and Pat Williams; Hawthorn, 1966; 350 pp., including index & illustrations; $12.50

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ghosts, spirits, demons, and devils; the blood-sucking vampires, werewolves, and other evil and terrifying inhuman monsters."

There is also a brief account of the history of the century-old spiritualist movement, together with a description of some of the more celebrated (and notorious) phenomena associated with it, as well as the techniques and technology of modern "psychic investigators." Finally, there is an unusually informative chapter on the variety of contemporary (Western) sects and societies concerned with spiritualism, occult, esoteric, or hermetic practices and beliefs—from the solidly established Theosophists and comparatively respectable Society for Psychical Research to the Great "I AM" and such California-cults as the Free Union for Creative Karma.

The book is profusely illustrated, with reproductions, diagrams, illustrations, and photographs, many in (dramatically good) color. Even more striking, for me, than the wide range of primitive and historical objects and artworks (from the cave paintings at Altamira to a full page Hieronymous Bosch, in color) were the photographs—many of them new, and some made especially for this book—accompanying the texts on witchcraft in England and voodoo in Haiti today.

There may be other books as carefully researched and clearly written as this, covering the same range. If so, I have not read them simply because (despite an active and continuing interest in the psychology of the supernatural) I have rarely found anything on the topic that I could stomach for more than a chapter or two. I find the bigotry of the jibing supersceptic [sic] no less irritating than the evangalism of the bedazzled believer, and the kindly condescension still to be found in too many anthropological texts no more realistic than the cabbalistic jargon of the esoteric initiate. Hill and Williams manage to bring the same interested objectivity to bear on the superstitions, sects, and sorcerers of today as on the magical rites of primitive animism.

The underlying attitude of both books under discussion here is strongly expressed in the introductory chapter of THE SUPERNATURAL, in a discussion of "inner and outer realities," and of some of the new modes in both psychology and physics "that defy our normal understanding of the world, in particular our familiar concepts of time and space." This highly contemporary insistence on insight as well as information, and imagination as well as tabulation, is particularly effective in the chapters on "The Secret Arts" and "In Search of Witches"; it is implicit in such typical passages as—

"Much of the information about witches collected in this chapter

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has . . . been drawn from accounts of witch trials and the evidence obtained by torture. But the authors have not accepted this material as 'the truth about witchcraft'. They accept it, and offer it, simply as the truth about *what people believed* about witchcraft.

". . . the fact that we *feel* rather than *think* about magic gives us an important clue to its nature. A belief in magic has its roots in the emotions and in the imagination. It comes from the inner world of the individual. With this in mind, we can see why so many writers on magic have failed to make the subject objectively meaningful."

Or, quoted from Xenophanes: "The Ethiopians make their gods black and snub-nosed; the Thracians say theirs have blue eyes and red hair. . . . Yes, and if oxen and horses or lions had hands, and could paint with their hands, and produce works of art as men do, horses would paint the forms of the gods like horses, and oxen like oxen, and make their bodies in the image of their several kinds."

Or, again: "The possibility of life beyond the Earth evokes today strong and partisan emotions. There are some who want very much to believe that extra-terrestrial life—particularly the intelligent variety—is common throughout the universe; and there are those who are committed to the view that extra-terrestrial life is impossible, or so rare as to have neither practical nor philosophic interest. It seems to me appropriate that in this book more than passing attention be paid to such psychological predispositions."

That last paragraph, of course, is not from THE SUPERNATURAL, nor is the one preceding it. Both are from INTELLIGENT LIFE IN THE UNIVERSE*, a splendidly readable discussion by two eminent astronomers.

I mentioned earlier that both books are collaborations. In the first case, Mrs. Williams is a South African, a well-known journalist, and a serious researcher in parapsychology; Mr. Hill is a Canadian poet, critic, editor, and historian; having met and talked with both of them, I know how much the book benefited by their interchange.

The collaboration in INTELLIGENT LIFE IN THE UNIVERSE was considerably more unlikely, and it needs no backstage knowledge to discover how effective the cross-fertilization was. One of the authors, Carl Sagan, describes it as "a peculiar kind of cooperative endeavor": I should have said rather, "spectacular."

Dr. Sagan is a member of the staff of Harvard University and

*INTELLIGENT LIFE IN THE UNIVERSE, I. S. Shklovskii and Carl Sagan; Holden Day, 1966; 488 pp. plus 27 pp., index, bibliography, preface, notes; $8.95

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the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory; Iosef Shmuelovitch Shklovskii, of the Sternberg Astronomical Institute of the Soviet Academy of the Sciences, is the author of an earlier volume (published in Moscow in 1963) from which the joint work grew.

"I have added about as much material as there was in the book initially," Sagan explains in his preface. "I have sent much of the entirely new material to Shklovskii for his comment, and he has sent much new material to me for inclusion. Since he does not travel outside the Soviet Union and I have never travelled to the Soviet Union, we have been unable to discuss the present edition in person. 'The probability of our meeting is likely to be smaller than the probability of a visit to Earth by an extraterrestrial cosmonaut,' he once wrote. . . ."

The work contains "occasional ideological differences. I have not tried to avoid these problems, but I also have not tried, in what is primarily a scientific work, to rebut each ideological assertion. When Shklovskii expresses his belief that lasting peace is impossible while capitalism survives, or implies that lasers are being actively developed in the United States for their possible military applications alone, I have let the content of these statements stand, despite their political intent. I have occasionally interjected some remarks on related subjects with which, perhaps, Shklovskii would disagree." (A simple and non-intrusive typographic device was adopted to make clear which views are jointly held, and which are individual to either author.)

"I do not think the reader will be distressed by the occasional appearance of a dialogue," Sagan says. This reader reports no distress, but a steady state of fascination punctuated by moments of delight and some instances of rare illumination.

If the book represented nothing more than a giant step forward in East-West communication, made possible by the clarity, humor, and intelligence of two unusual men, it would be worth buying and reading. But—of course—these same qualities applied to the subject at hand have not so much added to, as multiplied with, each other. Out of their combined backgrounds, the authors have drawn on a wider range of sources than one might have believed possible, even in a book of this size; and the operation of two larger-than-life intellects and imaginations, on each other as well as on the material, has produced a volume as fresh and dramatic in total impact as Sullivan's book was three years ago.

Not only is this book far more comprehensive (as it would have to be—in this field nowadays the scene expands more by the minute than by the year), but where Sul-

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livan gave us a trained observer's faithful, and insightful, narrative, INTELLIGENT LIFE is more like a first-hand report from the log of the exploration party. Again Sullivan's groundbreaking effort was, of necessity, directed largely toward convincing an incredulous public that reputable scientists were seriously studying such matters; Shklovskii and Sagan *are* (very) reputable scientists enthusiastically pursuing investigations no less "serious" for being so exciting, and focused quite naturally on the probabilities and potentialities which constitute their own working perspectives.

"The primary purpose of this book is to acquaint the reader interested in life in the universe with our *current* state of knowledge," says Shklovskii in his opening chapter. "The word 'current' is emphasized, because rapid progress is being made in the study of this problem." Roughly half the material in the volume is either openly speculative, or an exposition of ideas which were still "speculation" last year and have only just graduated to the status of "hypotheses." The rest provides the informational background necessary for participation in the speculations. (But don't let familiar-looking chapter headings fool you into thinking you've read *that* part in a dozen other similarly-titled books; even the most familiar planetarium-lecture basic principles tend to take on a new aspect in the fresh light cast on them.)

The first two chapters are actually separate introductions by the two authors. Shklovskii provides a brief history of the concept of "panspermia" (ubiquitous life), from the ancient Vedda culture of Ceylon—which believed that the souls of the dead migrated to the heavenly bodies—through the present time, and concludes with a statement of the plan of the book, and—in just a few lines—a declaration of what emerges later in the book to be his own consuming interest: "The last section also illustrates the strength of man's intellect at its present level of development. Man, through his own activity, has already given real significance to and has in certain respects already changed the cosmos. What can we not expect in a few centuries?"

Sagan's opener is called Extraterrestrial Life as a Psychological Projective Test. Much of it is devoted to an amusing account of his experiences as an "expert" state's witness at the fraud trial of a flying saucer "contactee," concluding with a reverse switch in which he demonstrates the equal-and-opposite hazards of the wishful thinking of the contact-cultist and the fearful thinking of certain elements of the political and religious establishments. Speaking of the inconclusiveness of the evidence from Mariner IV in relation to

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possible life on Mars, he asks: "Why then were the communications media so quick to deduce a lifeless Mars? . . . They were unmistakably relieved . . ." and re-emphasizes his opening paragraph, quoted above: "The discovery of extraterrestrial life—and even more so, the question of extraterrestrial intelligence—is then many things to many men. . . . There are unconscious factors operating in the present arguments of both proponents and opponents of extraterrestrial life. I think both Shklovskii and I can be described as cautious optimists on this question. . . ."

If their views represent the present state of cautious optimism in science, there is cause for much rejoicing in science fiction heaven. I have spent most of my time here trying to convey the tone of this book, rather than its content, because it would be impossible in any case to summarize the material presented; but one chapter—Is There Life on Earth?—may serve as an example.

Making use of all available data regarding Earth from space vehicle instruments, and extrapolating from the information about other planets available at our present level of observational capacity, the authors assume the position of Martian astronomers analyzing the probability of life on Earth, and come up with what begins to seem an endless series of "inconclusives" and "not provens"—until the surprise ending, where the hypothetical Martian astronomer turns to the use of one of astronomy's most recently developed armaments, and—

Who am I to spoil a surprise ending? Suffice it that the application of this reverse-image astropsychodrama to the analysis of our information about the other planets of our solar system is a provocative and educational process.

A quick scan of some of what were high spots for me:

Sagan's analysis of the probable nature of the Cytherean (his choice) environment, based on the findings from Mariner II, and more recent observations at "visual, infra-red, and radio frequencies," ("Venus," he decides, "is very much like hell." Well, *we* knew that all along . . .)

Shklovskii's presentation of his much-publicized hypothesis, regarding the Moons of Mars as artificial satellites. ("Even if future observations indicate that the reported secular acceleration of Phobos is spurious, the hypothesis . . . has nevertheless been provocative, and thereby has served a useful purpose. It reminds us that the activity of a highly developed society of intelligent beings could have cosmic significance and could produce artifacts which would outlive the civilization that constructed them." Of course, we knew *that*, too . . .)

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Shklovskii's discussion of the proposals for "rebuilding the solar system" set forth independently by Tsiolkovskii and Freeman Dyson; and Sagan's description of related theories of Shklovskii's colleague, N. S. Kardashev, in connection with the possibilities for interstellar radio contact between civilizations.

Sagan's vivid retracing of a Sumerian myth which might conceivably be an account of a visit to Earth by extraterrestrial intelligences.

These are, clearly, selected highlights only. The scope of the book being what it is, I imagine another reader's choice might not even overlap with mine.

One or two final comments that must be made: —

First, an expression of gratitude to the authors for the simple but effective devices with which they simplified the following—and when necessary, skipping—of such mathematical notation as they felt essential to include.

Second, a reference to what may seem purely decorative functions, but which served to add (at least) two extra dimensions to my own view. One of these is the impressive quality and quantity of the illustrations: the clearest prints I have seen of some of the Ranger and Mariner photographs; some brilliant color photomicrographs; and really startlingly good reproductions of some stellar photographs (both familiar and new). The other "extra" is composed of dozens of effectively selected quotations and excerpts (including some cartoon reprints) placed between chapters. The quotation from Xenophanes at the beginning of this discussion was one such; the first section of the book is preceded by a grouping of a star cloud photograph, ten lines from Pindar ("There is one race of men, one race of gods . . ."), and a Pogo strip ("I been readin' 'bout how maybe they is planets people by folks with ad-vanced brains . . ."). Other contributors include (for instance) Charles Addams, Alphonso the Wise, Aristotle, Samuel Butler, Dante, Darwin, Democritus, Conan Doyle, Enrico Fermi, Jean Giradoux, T. H. Huxley, Herschel, Pasternak, Smelianov, Whitman, Yeats, "King Lear," The Book of Job, "Peanuts" . . .

Most frequently quoted is Christianus Huyghens ("New Conjectures Concerning the Planetary Worlds, Their Inhabitants and Productions," c. 1670), and the runner-up is Loren Eisely's THE IMMENSE JOURNEY (1946).

And finally, an added word of praise for the sensibly pruned bibliography, designed not to establish documentary credentials, but to direct the interested reader to associated material.

—JUDITH MERRIL

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"Oh, will I be glad when those blasted summer people are gone!"

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Since the eclipse of horseshoes and hard tires, the open road isn't exactly what it used to be. There is a different sort of wear and tear induced by the suction of pneumatic tires on smooth pavement, the straight, long pikes, the absence of landmarks, the dizzying speeds . . . If, after driving for a while on a thruway, you ever experience a sense of dislocation, a feeling of being out of touch, it may be time to turn off at the next exit—if you can find it.

THE ROYAL ROAD TO THERE

by Robert M. Green Jr.

"AFOOT AND LIGHT-HEARTED, I take to the open road."

John Jackson repeated these uplifting words to himself four or five times. They didn't seem to help much.

For one thing, he wasn't afoot, and neither was anyone else he could see. The bosky parkland bordering the superhighway on both sides, screening any possible view of the real world, seemed to extend an invitation to bucolic hikers; so did the flawlessly landscaped and manicured strip of greenery that separated the westbound lane from the eastbound one. Hikers, however, were not allowed on turnpike property, and drivers were not allowed to go slowly enough to get any kind of a look at the scenery; so it could hardly be said to exist, and might just as well have consisted of automobile graveyards and billboards.

A little bit of pretty parkland, John thought, went a long way. The prospect of 500 miles of precisely the same scenery did little to lighten a heart bordered on the left front by a temperature gauge that automatically indicated a boiling radiator, even when the car was standing still on a midwinter morning after a long night's rest; on the left rear by a 13-year-old daughter who had once been known to plead car-

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sickness after a two-minute spin on a bicycle; on the center rear by two dogs who had never been informed and still refused to believe that their proper place was not in the front seat arguing for prime positions on the driver's lap; on the right rear by a 12-year-old daughter who believed (A) that her older sister was a menace to the peace of the world and (B) that one mile was really ten miles so why weren't we "there"; and on the right by a litigious eight-month-old boy already redolent of sour milk and thoroughly exploited diapers, sitting on the lap of a beloved wife who was convinced that brakes should be *fully* applied at the first glow from the tail-light of a car a quarter of a mile ahead, and who was going to find her right foot clear through the floor before 300 more miles were disposed of.

"It isn't fair," grumbled the 13-year-old. "Hardly any of the signs are on my side."

"I got a Q," said the 12-year-old.

"Oh, you did not," said the 13-year-old.

"Did so," said the 12-year-old, known to John Jackson as the only living person who could spell Washington six different ways in a single paragraph. "It said 'Q miles to next Service Area.' "

"That was a two," said the 13-year-old.

"It's the same thing," said the 12-year-old. "That's the way I write a Q."

"You cheat," said the 13-year-old. "I'm not going to play any more. This isn't any fun."

John said, "I never thought I'd come to miss billboards. I'd give a lot for a Burma Shave jingle."

Mrs. said, "Oh, brother, if we get to Jackson City and the whole thing turns out to be a hoax—"

"I don't know. Jackson City's a pretty nice place. I used to have a lot of fun there. The kids can go swimming in the lake, and I'll bet they still have band concerts in the park at night."

"God. Five hundred miles of this for a band concert in the park."

"Well, there used to be kegs and kegs of honest-to-god beer. None of this pasteurized belchwater."

"How would you know? You haven't been back since you were ten years old."

"I used to hear the old guys talk. Anyway, it would be good for the girls."

"Which? Keg beer or pasteurized belchwater?"

Just then, the Labrador, whose name was Labrador, jumped on the lap of the 13-year-old.

"Mommy, make Labrador get off my lap. She smells bad."

"You know I can't make Labrador do anything."

"Push her into the middle of the seat," said John Jackson.

"I can't," said the 13-year-old. "It's full of suitcases."

"Push her on the floor then."

"She won't go."

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"Get on the floor yourself."

"I can't. I'll throw up."

"Did you know," said John Jackson. "This whole highway is a great big gravestone for Uncle Charley."

Rhubarb of dogtalk.

"Oh no," wailed the 13-year-old. "I pushed Labrador off and Toycollie jumped up."

"Thank God we didn't bring Duck and Turtle," said John Jackson.

"How could we bring Turtle?" asked the 12-year-old. "You flushed him down the toilet."

"I did not," said John Jackson.

"Well, if you didn't, where is he?" asked the 12-year-old.

"Am I your Turtle's keeper?"

"Are you absolutely certain they checked the water in the radiator at that last place?" asked Mrs.

"Of course I'm certain. Let me do the worrying."

"Toycollie is licking my face," said the 13-year-old. "I'm going to throw up."

"It's all very well for you to do the worrying," said Mrs. "But how can you tell what you're worrying about when the needle always says it's boiling?"

"You get clouds of steam when it's really boiling," said John Jackson. "Don't worry. I can always tell."

"That's what you said the last time," said Mrs. "The time we were coming back from Michigan. Remember?"

"Doesn't anybody want to know why we're driving on Uncle Charley's gravestone?" asked John Jackson.

"I know," said the 13-year-old. "Grandpa Jackson told me. He made carriages. He thought everybody was going to get sick of cars and go back to horse-and-carriages. He wouldn't let anybody build highways in his county, or even put tar on the roads."

"That sounds exaggerated to me," said Mrs. "You can't keep out highways even if you own the land. They just come around and condemn—"

"I don't guess anybody cares," said the 12-year-old, "but we've already gone past Jackson City. There aren't any more signs."

"Oh, go on," said John Jackson. "There's a sign every ten miles. We've got more than four hundred miles to go."

"There hasn't been a sign for more than a hundred miles," said the 12-year-old.

"We just passed one about eight miles back," said John Jackson. "It said 'Jackson City, four hundred-ten miles.' "

"That wasn't any eight miles."

"All I know," said the 13-year-old, "is what Grandpa Jackson told me, and he ought to know. He said they would have built this highway ten years sooner if it wasn't for Uncle Charley."

"Oh, that's silly," said Mrs. "Uncle Charley's been dead for a

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million years. John! You're going too fast. That car up there is slowing down for a turn."

"Which car up there? I didn't bring my binoculars."

"Can't somebody make Toycollie get off my lap?" said the 13-year-old.

"Hey. We're coming to a sign," said John Jackson.

" 'Jackson City, Four hundred-twenty miles,' " intoned the 12-year-old, who was the Official Sign Intoner.

"That's funny," said John Jackson. "I could have sworn the last sign said Four hundred-ten miles."

"Well, obviously it didn't," said Mrs. "Oh, you little monster! John, we're going to have to pull over so I can put another diaper on this brat."

"I'm looking for a place."

"When *did* your Uncle Charley die?" asked Mrs.

"Nobody knows," said John Jackson. "The last time I saw him was in 1925 or 26 when I was about eight, and he was supposed to be almost a hundred years old then."

"You mean he just disappeared? Anyway, I still don't see how he could have held up work on this highway. They only planned it about ten years ago."

"That's the great family mystery. You know, he always thought he was doing a great thing for Jackson City, keeping the old carriage plant in operation in the teeth of the automobile industry. He just knew that what the people really secretly wanted was horses and carriages and nice tree-shaded, dirt-top roads with sparrows and horse droppings. Road apples. Oh, he turned out a line of electric cars for sweet old ladies; one of my aunts used to drive one, but his real love was horses and buggies and livery stables, and he didn't give a damn how much money he lost, because for one thing he could afford it, and for another thing he was serene in the knowledge that he would be the only large-scale carriage maker in the U.S. when the people got fed up with those newfangled gasoline contraptions. It wasn't until sometime in the late twenties he got wind of the fact he wasn't appreciated in Jackson City. The people who weren't laughing at him behind his back were getting up petitions to have the roads paved and widened; so he just moved his whole plant, kit and caboodle to some corn fields he owned two or three hundred miles east of Jackson City. Built a regular little city, with winding lanes bordered by sycamore trees. No cars allowed. I never saw it myself, but Dad went there once. Said it was a real nice place."

"Then he didn't exactly disappear."

"None of us ever saw him again. He transacted all of his business through some lawyers with powers of attorney. Dad tried to see him; so did some of my uncles and

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aunts and cousins, but he always seemed to be 'away on a business trip.' They just couldn't get past the lawyers. Every now and then some bunch of politicians would try to pull right of eminent domain and start condemnation proceedings to get some kind of an automobile road through Uncle Charley's property, but every time that happened another bunch of politicians on Uncle Charley's payroll would pop up and get the thing squashed. Then, all of a sudden, five years ago, these lawyers closed out Uncle Charley's bank account, and deeded over all his property to the state. No explanation. The thruway engineers came out to take a look at the property they'd been trying to get their hands on for so many years and there wasn't a stick left of the carriage factory or the lanes or the sycamore trees. Nothing but barren land. The old-timers in Jackson City say that that must have been when Uncle Charley died and had everything put underground with him. Some of them call this the Charley Jackson Memorial Highway."

" 'Jackson City, Four hundred-thirty miles,' " intoned the 12-year-old.

"Hey, wait a minute," said John Jackson. "This is crazy."

He started to put on the brake.

"Watch out," shouted Mrs. "There's a car right behind you."

"A quarter of a mile right behind me," said John Jackson, pulling to a complete stop on the greenward bordering the pavement.

"Get out and stretch your legs if you want," said John Jackson. "I'm going to walk back and take a look at that sign."

Clouds of steam hissed from under the hood of the car.

John Jackson trotted back.

"It does say four hundred-thirty miles. Come on, let's all jump in the car and get rolling before we're dragged underground on the conveyor belt."

"What are you talking about?"

"Have you noticed the scenery? We've been passing the same scenery ever since we got on this damn highway. I've got it all figured out. We're on a treadmill. The highway and the scenery is shooting backwards at a rate of 60 miles an hour on a giant conveyor belt. As long as we're driving forward in the car at 60 miles an hour we're at least staying in the same place."

"But we don't want to stay in the same place," wailed the 12-year-old. "We want to get to Jackson City."

"The same place is better than some places."

He raised the hood, and began to unscrew the radiator cap, using a moist diaper. Suddenly the cap hurtled skyward on the corona of a mushroom-shaped cloud.

"Well," he said, "there's a case of cold cokes in the trunk compartment. I don't see why they would-

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n't do as well as water. Might make the radiator a little sticky, but what the hell."

"That's pretty finky, if you ask me," said the 13-year-old. "That was supposed to be our coke. Why don't you pour your nasty old beer in the car?"

"Might try that too," said John Jackson. "Bet it'd stink something awful. I wonder what the cops would say about a car with beer on its breath. Maybe there's a charge: 'Driving Drunken Auto.' "

As soon as the hissing of the radiator subsided, John poured in a whole six-pack of king-sized cokes.

"That'll do it," he said. "Let's go. I really feel I ought to push on. The guy that wrote me that letter about the will was awfully insistent about seeing me tonight."

"Arthur Jackson, Attorney. Is he one of your relatives?"

"I never heard of him. I can't think why he's in such a hurry after all these years, but I'd better play along."

"What I can't understand is how your Uncle Charley would have anything left to make a will about after blowing all that money on carriages and kept politicians."

"He was quite an inventor in his day. Dad says he had as many patents on his gadgets as Edison, and he kept right on drawing royalties. Don't ask me what he invented. Mechanical gadgets for manufacturing plants. Special valves. Stuff like that. Dad tried to explain it to me, but it was out of my line."

"Is he still drawing those royalties? He isn't officially dead, is he?"

"I guess not. I don't know. A lot of people suspected he was dead as far back as 1929, but nobody could prove anything. Those powers of attorney were perfectly legitimate, Dad says. Maybe Arthur Jackson, Attorney, can tell us the story."

"What's that funny noise the motor is making."

"That's a noise motors make. Maybe you think it's funny; I wish I had your sense of humor."

" 'Jackson City, Five hundred miles,' " intoned the 12-year-old.

"Damn practical jokers," said John Jackson. "I wish they didn't hem us in with all this shrubbery. Maybe I could recognize some of the countryside."

"Why don't you turn right at the next turn-off. You can ask the man in the toll booth how far it really is."

"Brilliant," said John Jackson.

The next turn-off looped around to the right in a full semi-circle, then dipped down through a tunnel that ran underneath the highway. John Jackson expected to find a toll booth when he emerged on the south side of the highway, but the turn-off looped again to the right in another full semi-circle and put him on the eastbound lane of the superhighway.

He pulled off the road, lifted

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his hood, and waited for a cop.

"Trouble, mister?" asked the cop.

"I want to go to Jackson City."

"You're going the wrong way, mister."

"I'm not going any way. I just want to know how far it is."

"How should I know, mister? Three, four, five hundred miles. You're going the wrong way. Take the next turn-off and get on the westbound."

"Thank you."

The next turn-off repeated the pattern, looping to the right, plunging under the highway then looping to the right again to feed the car onto the westbound lane. No toll-booth, no house, man, woman, dog, or brown cow. No escape.

"God damn," said John Jackson. "This highway has got us trapped. We're doomed."

"Oh, relax," said Mrs. "We probably just happened to get on some kind of a short-cut the policemen use to get from one lane to another. Just pull in at the next service area. Someone will tell us where we are."

"Will someone get us some cokes there?" asked the 13-year-old.

"And a cheeseburger?" asked the 12-year-old.

"That would be nice," said Mrs. "And some fresh milk for young Vesuvius here."

"And some ice cold gin for dear old Dad."

"You ought to be grateful they don't sell liquor on the throughway," said Mrs. "This would be a nightmare with drunken drivers."

"I *like* drunken drivers," said John Jackson. "I like neon signs and Dairy Queens and Burma Shave jingles. I even like traffic lights and cobbled Main Streets with trolley tracks down the middle. *This* is the nightmare."

"There's a sign," said the 12-year-old. "Q miles to next Service Area."

"That wasn't very funny the first time," said the 13-year-old.

At last there came a break in the homogenous scenery. A sign said, "Service—Restaurant—Next Right."

There was no one in sight in the gas pump area. A pennant suspended between two aisles of pumps said:

"Thank you for your patience. Service will be resumed within one week following frammistan."

"We don't need any gas," said John Jackson. "Let's go grab something to eat in the restaurant."

A sign on the main entrance to the restaurant said, "Absolutely no pets!!!! Violators will be persecuted!"

The 13-year-old said, "Labrador and Toycollie aren't pets. They're nuisances."

"Besides," said John Jackson, "after a certain amount of persecution you just get numb and it doesn't matter any more."

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So, with two slavering beasts leading the way, John Jackson, wife, baby and two daughters marched into the restaurant.

Which was uninhabited. Nothing was on the counters. No food or drink of any kind was visible *behind* the counters.

"Wait here," said John, "I'll go look in the kitchen. There must be someone there. If there isn't, I'll rustle up some food myself."

In the kitchen a dirty unshaven old man in greasy overalls was slopping something around in the sink—some kind of grey-green iridescent sludge.

"Can't we get something to eat?" asked John Jackson.

"Of course not," said the old man. "Not *this* week."

"Why not *this* week? What's so special about this week?"

"What are you? Some kind of communist?"

"I just asked a civil question."

"Git off your high horse, buddy-boy. I ain't the boss."

"Where is the boss?"

"He ain't here. Mebbe you can ketch him next week. Mebbe not."

"Look, don't you have anything here? I'll fix it myself and pay you for it. Just a glass of milk, maybe? I have two daughters and a baby in arms out there. It's not for myself."

"We got some roach paste."

"Oh, for God's sake. Have you got any roaches? Fresh roaches."

"You gotta ketch 'em yourself," said the man. "I got work to do."

John Jackson rejoined his family.

He drove the car back onto the westbound lane, assailed from the back seat by the wails of a 13-year-old with a tummy ache and the philippics of a 12-year-old who knew a conspiracy of finks when she saw one, and from the front seat by the vomit-punctuated bawls of an 8-month-old packed to the ears with cookie crumbs.

"There's another ratty finky sign," said the 12-year-old. "Jackson City, ten miles."

John Jackson, weeping, put on the brakes.

The same patrolman they had met on the eastbound lane pulled up beside the car.

"You again," he said. "What's your trouble now?"

"Look at that sign," said John Jackson.

"Jackson City, ten miles," said the cop. "So?"

"You know damn well Jackson City's at least three hundred and fifty miles from here."

"How would I know, mister? I never go anywhere's off the highway."

"Where do you go when you go home?"

"We got a barracks back down the road a piece. On the eastbound. Some of the fellows goes various places, but me, I never saw no use in it. This here is a real pretty road. Regular home-like."

"To each his own," said John

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Jackson. "How do we get off. Suppose we want something to eat, or a place to sleep."

"Well, I see different people turning off different places. I never heard no complaints. It's like you take your choice."

John Jackson moved on.

"There's another sign," said the 12-year-old. She intoned it. " 'Had enough? Take next right turn-off.' "

"Okay," said John Jackson. "Everybody wins. We're going to find a motel. To hell with Jackson City."

The turn-off curved around to the right, descended into a tunnel under the highway and kept on descending. The tunnel was brightly illuminated by overhead daylight lamps.

"It stinks," said the 13-year-old, as they walked along the cinder path under the sycamores, watching horses and buggies go elegantly by on the dirt-topped lane.

"You get used to it," said the portly gentleman with the silver hair and tortoise-rimmed glasses. "In fact you become fond of it after awhile. When I was a boy all towns had this aroma."

"Road apples," said John Jackson, his eyes fogged with nostalgia.

"What are they going to do to our dogs?" asked Mrs.

"Oh, they'll be all right," said the portly gentleman. "They'll get the best of care. You understand, of course, we can't have dogs loose on the streets here until they become accustomed to the horses. Even on the leash, a barking dog can cause trouble. You'll see several dogs running free here, but of course they've been here a long time and they take the horses for granted."

"Oh, look," said the 12-year-old. "A pony cart. Can I have one?"

"We'll see," said the portly gentleman.

John Jackson looked up at the brilliantly shimmering blue and silver spangled dome of "sky."

"Is it always daytime here?" he asked.

"Oh no," said the portly gentleman. "We have splendid nights. With wheeling constellations and a moon that waxes and wanes. Uncle Charley is an ingenious fellow."

"Uncle Charley? Is? You mean to say Uncle Charley is still alive?"

"We pretend he is. No one really knows, except possibly the Board of Directors. Frankly, I've always had a sneaking suspicion that there never really was an Uncle Charley—only a genial myth cooked up by the Board."

"Well, you're mistaken there," said John Jackson. "Uncle Charley is or was my grandfather's brother. I used to play horsey on his knee."

"Oh, that's right. I'd forgotten. You're one of *the* Jacksons. The relatives. There are a few others here, but I've never met one. I've often wondered if that wasn't part

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of the myth, but I see I've been wrong."

"Aren't you a relative?"

"Oh, way back, perhaps. Perhaps not. Jackson is not an uncommon name. In any event, since you are a directly traceable relative, I'll have to dig out the by laws and constitution. As I recall, there is a special deal for kin closer than second cousin. I've never had to look it up before."

"Deal?"

"Let's don't talk business right now. You people are tired and no doubt irritable. We're almost to my house. I'll fix you all something cold to drink and then we can get down to brass tacks."

They all turned onto a flagstone path that led through a gently sloping maple and spruce shaded lawn up to a big old field stone and white clapboard house with a port-cochere and a veranda furnished with wide-backed wicker chairs and a cushioned porch-swing.

"Here we are," said the portly gentleman. "Be seated please, and I'll do the honors. Scotch and soda?"

"Please," said John Jackson.

"And ginger ale for the kiddies. Here, madam. Let me have that bottle. I'll wash it and fill it with warm milk for the baby."

"Oh, thank you, thank you," sighed Mrs. "I never realized a kidnapping could be so enjoyable."

"I think you'll recant on the 'kidnapping' when you hear my offer," said the portly gentleman. He chuckled and went indoors.

When the portly gentleman came out again, he was pushing, of all things, a baby's play pen on wheels, fully equipped with rattle, teddy bear, and counting beads. On the cushioned floor of the play pen was a silver tray bearing ice-jingling drinks and a leather bound "Constitution and By laws of the Jackson Carriage Corp."

"I don't know why I keep this pen around the house," said the portly gentleman. "The 'baby' is away at college now. I suppose I'm a reactionary sentimentalist. I think you'll be more comfortable, madam, if you put the baby in here. The baby will be happier too, I'm sure."

"You're an angel," said Mrs.

By the end of five minutes, the baby, bottle in mouth, was happily asleep on the floor of the play pen, and John Jackson, halfway through his second drink, was toying idly with the notion that God was in his heaven and all was right with the world.

"Now," said the portly gentleman, dividing his attention between John and the leather bound book on his lap, "I suppose you have a great many questions. Fire away."

"Well, for one thing," said John Jackson, "I really haven't any reason to complain—yet. But you did write that you wanted me to come

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to *Jackson City* to talk about Uncle Charleys' *will*. Doesn't that smack of fraud?"

The portly gentleman grinned. "Technically, no. We do insist on calling this place 'Jackson City' for a number of very good reasons. And I was using the word 'will' in a rather archaic sense. 'Wishes.' I really invited you to come here to talk about Uncle Charley's 'wishes.' A quibble, I grant you. I knew you would be misled, and frankly that was my intent, though if it came to a court of law I would say otherwise."

"It won't come to that," said John Jackson. "Actually I'm damn grateful we don't have to drive any farther today. But here's one thing that puzzles me. There were lots of other drivers on the highway today, and they must have seen the same signs and come to the end of their tethers just about the same time I did. But when I drove down here the only car I saw was mine. Where are all the other cars?"

"Proceeding safely to their destinations I trust. No one saw those signs but you Jacksons."

"And one highway cop."

"The policeman doesn't count. For all I know, his name may be Jackson, but I doubt if we'll lure him here."

"But why us and no one else?"

"No other Jacksons were out today. We only collect Jacksons."

"How did you work it? That business with the signs."

"Frankly, I don't know. I told you Uncle Charley is an ingenious fellow."

"Do you intend to keep us here? Not that it isn't a lovely place, but—"

"Oh no," said the portly gentleman. "You *can't* stay here. There are no positions open at the plant. Of course, if you care to make out an application, we can put you on our waiting list, and—"

"Never mind," said John Jackson. "I have too many commitments where I live now. I just asked. Now, how about my car? Do I get it back?"

"That's entirely up to you," said the portly gentleman. "We make you an offer, and you are free to accept or reject it. A few Jacksons have rejected our offer and have driven away from here unmolested in their own cars. The majority of Jacksons have chosen to accept. Ah! here it is. For all direct descendants of Charles Jackson, his brothers, John and Jeremy Jackson, and his sister, Mary Jackson Spoor. We do have a few Spoors here. Not many. Fine family. I hadn't realized they were relatives. Anyway, here's the offer. First, $5,000 for your car. In addition, we will give you and each member of your immediate family one horse and horse-drawn vehicle *or* an electric chariot guaranteed not to run over 15 miles an hour. We will set up and subsidize a livery stable in your community. In return you

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will promise—and we have ways of holding you to your promise—never to own, drive, or ride as a passenger in a private automobile. You may, however, travel in public automotive vehicles such as taxicabs, buses, ambulances and the like. Of course you may ride on trains."

"I want a pony! I want a pony!" said the 12-year-old. "And a cute little red cart."

"I want a palomino like on the tv," said the 13-year-old.

"We haven't any place to pasture a pony or a horse," said John Jackson.

"We are also prepared to buy you five acres of pasture near your home," said the portly gentleman.

"Good gosh," said John Jackson. "Who could turn down a deal like that? Why there must be millions of Jacksons in America. General Motors won't take it lying down."

"Unfortunately there are thousands of Jacksons who simply can't be enticed to this part of the country. Next year we're planning to expand our list to include Smiths. Then Espositos. Then Meyers."

"My God," said John Jackson. "A giant tranquillizer pill. But you'll ruin the economy. Ford will be after you with tanks."

"Whose economy are you talking about? It won't ruin Uncle Charley's economy."

"Oh hell," said John Jackson. "You don't mean to tell me the plant is making a profit on this."

"Not yet. Not yet. Time will tell. As I said, we're beginning to run a little low on Jacksons, but next year we're going after Smiths. It will keep us busy."

"I want an electric chariot," said Mrs.

"You shall have one, madam. Now, if you don't mind, I'll show you to your rooms and you can wash up for dinner. Tomorrow I'll take you through the works and you may pick out the horses and equipage you wish to have shipped to your home. Then I'll hitch up old Nellie and we'll take a ride to the railroad station. I'm sure you're anxious to get home."

"Well," said John Jackson to his neighbor, Anderson, "I do have to get up an hour earlier to make my train, but it's a nice time of day. We'll make the 8:10 without any trouble."

"Golly," said Anderson. "Listen to that electric motor purr. Just like a happy little cat."

They passed a stranger driving a surrey with a fringe on top.

"Hi, Jackson," shouted John.

"Hi, Jackson," shouted the stranger.

"If he's lucky he'll make the 8:40," said Anderson. "That's a good train."

An angry black Cadillac hooted behind them. John turned around and thumbed his nose.

"Just you wait till next year, Smith," he shouted. ◀

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Charles Beaumont died on February 21, after a long illness. He was 38. He was 26 when his story "The Last Caper" appeared in our March 1954 issue; it was the first of the talented young writer's many stories and articles (19 in all) to appear in these pages. If there was one quality which ran through much of his work for us, it was probably the "wild, wacky, irreverent sense of humor" which his friend and colleague William Nolan mentions in the personal appreciation which follows this story. Although the story has humor as its theme, it is not basically funny, since it deals with a vacuum created by the loss of humor.

GENTLEMEN, BE SEATED

by Charles Beaumont

OF COURSE, KINKAID'S FIRST thought was: I'm going to be sacked. A vision of disgrace, endless wandering; and inevitable death by starvation floated before his mind. Then, to his surprise, he relaxed. The terror vanished, and he found himself thinking: Well, at least I won't have to look at his stupid face any more. That's something. And I won't have to say yes to him when I mean no, hell no, you're as wrong as it's possible to get, you miserable fathead!

He pushed away from his desk and walked down the long aisle of drafting tables to a little gray door marked, simply: William A. Biddle—District Manager. He stood there a moment, wondering how he had sinned, not doubting that he had, for why else would he have been summoned? Then, swallowing, he knocked.

"Come in."

Kinkaid turned the plain metal knob and walked inside. The room, Model 17-B, "Regional Executive," was scientifically-designed for comfort and efficiency, but Kinkaid did not feel either comfortable or efficient. The Mov-E-Mural, depicting a wind-rippled mountain lake; the scent of rain and forests (#8124—"Huntsman"); the Day-Lite; and the distant strains of music (*La Gioconda*)—all chosen to keep the

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mind undeflected from its ordained course—served only to upset him further. He walked across the Earth'n-Loam floor to the desk.

It was a perfectly ordinary desk, uncluttered by items of memorabilia, solid as a butcher's block, functional as the State. Yet it frightened Kinkaid. Perhaps because of the way it seemed to be not in the room but of it, perhaps because of the way it seemed to grow vertically from the floor and horizontally from the paunch of William Agnew Biddle.

"Sit down."

Kinkaid perched on the edge of the Relax-O-Kushion and met the gaze of his superior. Biddle drummed his fingers on the Teletalk and frowned. Presently he spoke, in the unlubricated voice Kinkaid had come to despise: "I suppose you're wondering why I asked you to come in."

"Yes, sir."

Biddle opened a drawer and withdrew a sheaf of papers. "I have here," he said, "a dossier. It contains a full report on your life to date." He flipped through the light-green pages. "I see that you were born in 1952, that you are unmarried, and that you have been employed at Spears' Research Laboratories for seven years. At no time have you arrived at the office late or left early. You are a member of Rotary, and attend the Young Men's Political Forum every other Tuesday. Outside interests and hobbies; none. Is this correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"You are, in short, the perfect employee."

"I do what I can, sir."

"Precisely. No more and no less. One could scarcely tell you from a billion other laborers. Yet I believe there *is* a difference." Biddle continued to frown. "You may recall that on the way to my office yesterday morning, I tripped."

"Yes, sir."

"What was your reaction?"

"Regret, sir."

"Indeed?" Very slowly, Biddle removed a cigar from his breast pocket. He skinned off the cellophane wrapping and moistened the tip. "It's a serious world we live in," he said, "and that is why we are a serious people." He touched a spring on his silver lighter and sucked flame into the cigar. "Don't you agree?"

Kinkaid nodded. "Definitely, sir."

"Definitely," said William Agnew Biddle, whereupon the cigar in his mouth exploded.

Kinkaid leapt to his feet.

He stared at his superior, whose face was now covered with the splayed ends of the demolished cigar, and then felt a curious constriction in his chest and a peculiar, uncontrollable force which caused the corners of his mouth to stretch upward.

"What are you doing?" asked Biddle, suddenly.

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Kinkaid's hands twitched in a futile gesture. The more Kinkaid looked at his superior, the greater and more uncontrollable the constriction, the higher the corners of the mouth. It was a frightening sensation. "I don't know," he said.

"Then I'll tell you," said Biddle, scraping the tobacco from his blackened face. "You're doing the same thing you did when I tripped. You're *grinning.*"

"Sir, I assure you—"

"Kinkaid, I have eyes in my head, and I say you're *grinning!* Why?"

"I don't know, sir!"

Biddle took a step closer. "I do. You're amused, Kinkaid. That's why. An incident has just occurred which might have caused blindness or permanent injury to my face. I ask you, is there anything funny in that?"

"No, sir."

"And yet you grinned."

"It was involuntary."

"That hardly matters, Kinkaid. The point is, you *did* grin. I knew it!"

"Sir?"

"How did it feel?"

Kinkaid shifted on the Relax-O-Kushion. "I'm afraid I don't understand," he said.

"Did it feel . . . strange?"

"Yes."

"But not unpleasant?"

Kinkaid shook his head.

"Good! Splendid!" Biddle wiped the remaining patches of soot from his face. "Kinkaid," he said, "what are you doing tonight?"

"Nothing in particular."

"Would you care to spend an evening with me?"

"That would be fine, sir. But—"

"No buts! Meet me at Kelly's, Ninth and Spring, at eight o'clock. Your questions will be answered then. In the meantime, say nothing of this episode—to anyone. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir." Kinkaid rose.

"Kinkaid."

"Yes, sir?"

"Why do firemen wear red suspenders?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Poor boy," said Biddle. "You will."

Kelly's was unlike any restaurant Kinkaid had ever seen; except, of course, in the historicals. Entering, he felt peculiarly suspect. Instead of the usual bright light, there was darkness. Instead of the normal cataract of voices, silence. Instead of the endless rows of tables, emphasizing Togetherness, a few booths by the wall. At the last booth, he stopped. William Agnew Biddle was seated before a glass which contained a colorless fluid.

"James, I'm so glad you decided to come. Thought I saw you changing your mind by the door."

Kinkaid sat down across from his superior. Somehow Biddle was different. His voice was no longer

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dry and mechanical. His eyes seemed to have little lights in them.

"Ever been to a real restaurant?"

"Like this? No."

"Pity. I can't say the food is particularly health-giving—but once you've tried it, you can't go back to the lab stuff. Care to try?"

"I'm not very hungry, sir, to tell the truth."

"Oh. Well, you won't mind if I go ahead." Biddle drained the glass, then snapped his fingers. A man in a red jacket appeared out of the shadows. "A nice porterhouse, Sam. Salad, with roquefort. My usual."

"Yes, sir," the man said, and vanished.

"Being waited on is agreeable, too," said Biddle. "Now. I suppose at this point you're thinking: Poor old boy, he's flunked his mentals."

"Oh, no, sir. It's just that I'm a little—"

"Confused. Yes. And with good reason. First it appears you're going to be fired, then it appears you're being subjected to some sort of test. As it happens, neither is the case."

Kinkaid said, "Oh."

"You see, James, I've had my eye on you for quite a while. Not that there was ever anything overt, anything one could put one's finger on . . . But I *sensed* something about you."

The man in the red jacket reappeared, bearing trays. He set many dishes in front of Biddle. Then he vanished again.

Biddle began to eat. "They'll tell you there's no such thing as intuition," he said, between bites, "but they're wrong. I knew, somehow, that you'd grin when the cigar exploded. Of course, I'd *hoped* for a laugh, but we can't have everything can we? *How* did I know about the grin?" He shrugged, cocking his sparse-haired, pink-fleshed head to one side. "For a long time I've felt your hatred. Highly unscientific! But I've felt it nonetheless. The way you say 'good morning,' for instance. It's not a greeting, it's a curse. What you *mean* is: 'I hate you, Mr. Biddle. I hate everything about you.' Am I right?"

"Well . . ."

"Of *course* I'm right!" Biddle chewed lustily. "The district manager of Spears' Research is, by and large, a horse's ass. He is pompous and rude and officious and cold. But he is also highly competent, and therefore above suspicion. The authorities would believe him, no matter what they were told. No matter *what*. Remember that."

"All right," said Kinkaid.

Biddle glanced at his watch, then snapped his fingers again, loudly. The man in the red jacket materialized.

"Check, Sam," said Biddle. Then, rising: "Come along, James. It's just about that time."

They rode the moving belts to

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the dark north end of the city, then they walked. Soon Kinkaid's legs began to hurt. He wanted to stop and rest, but pride prevented him. Biddle, who was over seventy, appeared to be totally unaffected by the exertion.

After a while, the district manager said: "Been out this way before?"

Kinkaid shook his head.

"It's called No Man's Land. They'll have it torn down in a few years, torn down, swept away, forgotten." Biddle sighed. "All these lovely, impractical buildings . . ." He pointed to a huge, dark, sightless structure, untenanted for decades, poised, it seemed, on the fine edge of collapse. "A lot of unhappiness there, James. But a lot of happiness, too. Stop a moment. Close your eyes. Can't you almost hear the crying and the laughter?"

Kinkaid closed his eyes. He heard nothing but the hum of the city.

"It will come. Don't force it." Biddle reached into his pocket. "Now I'll have to ask you to cooperate." He withdrew a pair of glasses, opened them, and hooked them on Kinkaid's ears. "Can you see?"

"No."

"Good."

Kinkaid felt himself being revolved. Dizziness set in immediately.

"It's necessary the first time," said Biddle. "In case you're rejected."

Feeling slightly ill, Kinkaid walked what he considered a terrible distance, turning innumerable corners, doubling back, climbing steps. After perhaps an hour of this, Biddle said: "Take 'em off."

They were in an alcove of some sort. Biddle winked, walked to the paint-peeling door and knocked three times. There was a pause. Then a panel slid open and a face appeared.

"Why does the chicken cross the road?" inquired a voice.

"To get to the other side," said Biddle.

The door opened.

Kinkaid followed his superior into a plush-hung hallway. Standing in the hallway, blocking a second door, was a tall man in a peppermint-striped suit. His face was glistening black, except for the mouth, which was broadly outlined in white. His hair was short and kinky. He held a circular, bangled instrument which Kinkaid recognized as an ancient *tambourine.*

"Good evening, Mister Bones," said Biddle.

"Good evenin'," said the man with the black face.

"Is he in?"

"Yassuh."

"Tell him member seven-oh-nine is here, with the recruit."

"Yassuh, boss!" said the man. He tapped the *tambourine*, turned and walked out the doorway.

Within moments he was back.

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"Dis yere way."

Kinkaid and Biddle accompanied the man up a long, narrow flight of stairs to a small red door and there they stopped. The man with the black face pressed a button.

From an overhead speaker a voice called: "Why does the fireman wear red suspenders?"

"To keep his pants up," said the *tambourine* man, flipping a toggle.

"So make the scene."

There was a sharp buzzing sound. The door swung open. Kinkaid and Biddle followed their guide in.

Instinctively, Kinkaid gasped and clutched at Biddle for support. His first impression had been that the room was upside down. He closed his eyes. Slowly, he opened them. The impression remained.

Biddle made a peculiar noise in his throat. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "This is known as a gag."

"A gag?" Kinkaid stared up at what could only be the floor. He saw a couch, a chair, a table, and even a small sleeping dog.

"Exactly. It will be explained." Biddle marched across the ceiling, from which sprouted a long chain topped by an antique light bulb. "Come along."

Taking care to look straight ahead, Kinkaid made his way forward. His employer pressed a second button and a panel slid back, exposing a second room.

It was hardly a comfort.

Here there were mirrors, stationed along the four walls. As Kinkaid passed them, he saw himself turn fat, slim, big-headed, pin-headed, three-faced, and invisible.

"Deposit the can titherwards, ofay," said the man known as Mister Bones, gesturing.

"How's that?" Kinkaid looked at the chair which had been pulled up. "Oh." He sat down. As he sank into the frayed brown cushion, there was a loud, embarrassing noise.

"Yak, yak!" said Mister Bones.

Kinkaid rose, unsteadily. "I think," he said, "that I'd better go."

"Too late," said Biddle.

"Boo!"

Kinkaid jumped backward, colliding with a large desk. When equilibrium returned, he found himself staring at a figure alongside which the man with the black face seemed absolutely humdrum. This figure, reflected a hundred times throughout the room, wore a golden mask and a skin-tight suit of many colors, each color in the shape of a diamond, each diamond a different hue from the other. The figure approached, and as it did so, the tiny bells attached to its ankles and to its wrists and to its high-peaked cap tinkled wildly.

"What goes up the chimney down but not down the chimney up?" demanded the figure, raising a jeweled stick.

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"I don't understand the question," said Kinkaid. "Would you repeat it?"

"No," said the belled figure. Pointing the stick at Biddle: "Tell him."

"An umbrella," said Biddle.

The man with the black face slapped his knees. Peculiar noises issued from his throat. They were, Kinkaid thought, like the noises of the Laff-Tracks on TV; but also not like them.

"Mister Bones," said the belled figure, "it's toodle-oosville, *s'il vous plait.*"

The man with the black face tapped his *tambourine*, turned and walked headlong into the wall. Again Kinkaid felt the strange constriction in his chest. The ends of his mouth curled upwards as the man crashed to the floor, rolled, picked himself up and staggered through the doorway.

"I don't know, Biddle," said the harlequin figure. Kinkaid could feel hot eyes staring upon him from behind the golden mask. "I'm very dubious."

"He smiled," said Biddle, frowning.

"Yes, but that was a yok. We've got to be *so* careful."

"Of course. I know that. That's why I waited to be sure." Biddle put his arm around Kinkaid's shoulder. "Understand, he's a beginner. And he *was* amused by the trick cigar."

The bells tinkled. "*Was* he?"

"He very nearly laughed."

"Well!" Silence. Then, once more, the bells; louder; much louder. The figure reached across the desk. "Good to meet up with ya, podnuh!"

Hesitantly, Kinkaid accepted the hand. There was a loud buzz, followed by a painful tickling sensation on his palm. He jerked away.

The Laff-Track noise again, from Biddle's throat. Listening, Kinkaid was hardly aware of the lava-hot ball gathering and expanding inside him. When it burst, he was as surprised as the others. "That's it!" he shouted, slamming his fist down on the desk. "I don't know what the hell all of this is about, but I know one thing—I don't want any part of it. You hear? You people—you're psycho! You know that? Psycho!"

He strode angrily to the door.

It was locked.

"You see!" said Biddle. "Emotion."

"Yes," said the belled figure. "That's encouraging, though far from conclusive." He gestured. "Mister Kinkaid, please calm yourself. This is all quite necessary."

"For what?"

"Membership. Do sit down, but take care to remove the Whoopee-Cushion. Now. I gather Mister Biddle has told you nothing."

"That's right," said Kinkaid, still annoyed.

"Then I'll explain. You are in the

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headquarters of the S.P.O.L.—the Society for the Preservation of Laughter. We're a secret organization, running counter to established law. Most of what we do is either frowned upon or strictly forbidden. We are, in short, outlaws."

Kinkaid glanced at Biddle, then struck a cigarette, nervously.

"I," said the belled figure, "am known as the Grand Jester. Mister Biddle, here, is one of our Interlocutors. Should you be accepted, you would start as a Schlock. It is no disgrace: we were all Schlocks, once. After six months, however, you would be entitled to apply for a raise in status. Assuming a positive vote, you would then ascend to the Second Degree, that of Hipster. And so forth. Am I making myself clear?"

"Not exactly," said Kinkaid.

"Well, then, skipping the parliamentary jazz for the mo," said the Grand Jester, "it should be enough to say that our title explains our purpose. The world has forgotten how to laugh, Mister Kinkaid. Some of us regret that fact. Unlike the authorities, we feel that laughter is sufficiently important to be preserved, despite the grave psychological risk. You dig?"

"I didn't know there *was* any psychological risk in laughter."

"Then you have not been with it, friend-o. Most humor, you see, has its roots in cruelty. In stamping out cruelty, we have automatically stamped out humor. Therefore, there ain't much to laugh at no more.

"This is the story," continued the man in the golden mask. "Once upon a time, the world was a basically bad scene. We had disease and war and oppression and prejudice, and all that scam. The worst! How did the people endure it? By laughing. They worked out all their beefs with boffs, so to speak. Then the psychologists and the censors came on. We got sophisticated. Conditions improved. And humor vanished." With his jeweled stick he pressed a number of buttons on the desk. "It's a fragile thing, humor. Analysis can kill it. But we are an analytical people now, so you'll have everything explained to you—once—to eliminate psychological after-blast. Now. I trust you understand the trick cigar episode?"

Before Kinkaid could answer, Biddle said: "I thought it best to wait." He turned. "James, it was simply that a figure of authority was momentarily rendered ridiculous. Sort of a consummation."

The Grand Jester shook his head, causing the bells to ring. "Leave him alone," he said. "Mister Kinkaid, what about the man who walked into the wall?"

Kinkaid thought a while. "What about him?"

"He was painted to represent a Negro. Negroes constitute a minority race. Somewhere deep inside you, you are prejudiced

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against minority races. You wish them ill. When ill befalls them, you laugh."

"That's absurd," said Kinkaid.

"Yes," said the Jester, "but partially true. If your mother had walked into the wall, you would not have grinned. Ergo and thus. How else do you account for the disappearance of Negro humor? Of all racial humor, for that matter? It's basically prejudicial, cruel."

"The upside-down room is another example," said Biddle.

"Precisely," said the Jester. "I have a peep-hole through which I observe visitors. As they stumble about in discomfort, or panic, I laugh. You, Mister Kinkaid, made me laugh quite heartily. It was endsville."

"The peculiar words," said Biddle, "amuse because they are an expression of individuality. They may be interpreted as a form of rebellion against organized society."

The jester reached into his desk, withdrew four oranges and began to juggle them. "I don't think he gets it."

"Give him time!"

"All right." The oranges fell to the floor. "My own costume harks back to a figure of great pathos, the Court Jester. He was usually a dwarf or a cripple. Fu*neeee*!"

A buzzer sounded. The man in the golden mask picked up a microphone. "What has four wheels and flies?" he shouted.

"A garbage truck!" returned a chorus of voices.

"Make it!"

The door opened. Five figures entered the room. The first was clad in a billowing polka-dot suit, the second in dark rags, the third in long underwear, the fourth in a toga, while the fifth and last was mother naked. The figures lined up in front of Kinkaid and regarded him speculatively.

"First degree interlocutors," said Biddle. "Your judges."

The naked man stepped forward. "Have you heard the one about the little moron who tried to look through a screen and strained his eyes?"

Kinkaid said, "No."

There was a pause. The naked man stepped back.

The ragged man took his place. In a high-pitched sing-song voice, he said: "Roses are red, daisies chartreuse. If you will bend over, I'll give you a start."

"What?"

The polka-dot man reached into his pocket and took out a large paper, which he unrolled. It was a line drawing of two bearded men imbedded to their chests in jungle slime. A quotation at the bottom of the picture read: 'Quicksand or not, I've half a mind to struggle.'

The man in long underwear leaned on a cane, which snapped in two. From the floor he said: "There were these real wild hopheads sitting on a curb. They're

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smoking away. Along comes this fire engine going about a hundred miles an hour, with the bells and the siren, screaming along. It screams right by them. Wait a minute, I forgot to say they were high. Y'know? Anyway, the first hophead turns to the other hophead and says, 'Like, man. I thought they'd *never* leave.' "

The man in the toga raised his hand. "There was a young man from Saint Bee's, who was stung on the hand by a wasp. Said he, with a grin, as he something-something, 'I'm sure glad it wasn't a hornet.' "

The five figures then began to run about the room, singing:

"He thought he saw a Banker's
Clerk Descending from the bus:
He looked again, and found it
was A Hippopotamus:
'If this should stay to dine,' he said, 'There won't be much for us!' "

"Won't be much for us!" cried Biddle. "Won't be much for us!"

Abruptly the song stopped. The figures ceased their running. They peered at Kinkaid, who had sat frozen for the past several minutes; then they scampered, howling, from the room.

The Grand Jester balanced the jeweled stick on his nose and said: "They'll vote tonight."

"What do you think?" asked Biddle.

"Hard to say."

"I know, but what do you think?"

"Won't tell," said the Jester.

Biddle sighed. "All right," he said, and took Kinkaid's arm. "Nothing to do now but wait. Let's go downstairs. Maybe we can catch an orgy."

They sat in heavy leather chairs, Biddle wiping his forehead with a handkerchief, Kinkaid merely sitting, waiting for the nausea to pass.

A man in a white jacket paused and put glasses in their hands.

"Absinthe," said Biddle. "It'll rot out your eyes if you make a habit of it. Like most sins, though, it's harmless in moderation."

The thickish liquid tasted bad to Kinkaid, but appeared to settle his stomach.

Biddle was mumbling.

"What?"

"I said, I may have made a mistake." The district manager swallowed all the liquid in his glass and belched. "No point being pessimistic, though." He rose from the chair. "Come along, it's almost show time. There are a few things I want you to see."

Kinkaid followed his superior across a deep red carpet to a room. The walls of the room were lined with books.

Biddle handed Kinkaid a gilt-edged book weighing at least ten pounds. Opening at random, Kinkaid found a drawing which depicted communal breeding.

"The Germans were great hands

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at pornography," Biddle said, chuckling. "They almost made an art of it. So did the Japanese. Here—this is our collection of *graffiti*." He reached down an impressive leather-bound volume. "You're probably not familiar with the word. It refers mainly to the scrawls one used to find on the walls of public restrooms." He flipped through the pages. "Some wonderful stuff, really. Completely uninhibited. Take this: 'Here I sit, broken-hearted—' "

"Mr. Biddle," said Kinkaid. "I'm not feeling very well."

"Oh? That's too bad. Well, next time. In case you're alone: this section contains essays and short works of fiction; this section is devoted entirely to cartoons; that's the film vault over there. All the Chaplin pictures, Buster Keaton, W. C. Fields, Laurel and Hardy, the Marx Brothers, et al. Also a rather interesting selection of stag reels. When you decide to look at those, by the way, have one of the interlocutors help you. Personally I would recommend 'Bathroom Frolics,' though 'A Night at the Zoo' is also first rate."

There was an ugly bleating sound.

"The Bronx cheer," said Biddle. "That means show-time. Here we go."

They hurried out of the book-filled room, across the crowded bar, through a curtained doorway, to a small amphitheatre.

They sat down. The lights dimmed. The curtains parted. A small man in a checked suit walked to the center of the stage.

"Anybody wanna buy a duck?"

The people in the amphitheatre roared. A large man with white hair jabbed his elbow into Kinkaid's ribs. "Too much!" the man said. "Too much!"

The footlights became dimmer. A man in patched clothes shuffled across the stage. A spotlight came on. The man took a short-handled broom from his pocket and tried to sweet away the spotlight.

Again the roar.

Two men with black faces and white gloves shambled across the stage.

The tall one said: "Crony, my boy, where has you been? I ain't seen you in a long time!"

The short one said: "I been in de jailhouse."

"Whuffo?" asked the tall one.

"Well," said the short one, "lemme ax yo sumfin'. What would you do if you come home and found yo wife in bed wid anudder man?"

"I would simply cut my wife's acquaintance."

"Dat's all I did. An' believe me, I cut him deep!"

"Yak! Yak!"

"Negroes," said Biddle, "were thought to be morally lax. The humor here derives from the odd speech patterns, the misunderstanding of a common phrase, and the casual attitude toward murder.

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But forget that. Take it for what it is. Try!"

Kinkaid tried, but he did not understand any of the things that passed before his eyes. Biddle's voice was a distant hum. The lights danced inside his mind.

When they returned to the lounge, Biddle ordered drinks.

They took a corner booth.

"Look at it this way," Biddle said. "Humor is an escape valve for the emotions. Everybody has emotions, even today. They're building up, all over the world. Getting ready to explode.

"James, listen to me," Biddle said. "This is the way it was. When television was born, censors started cracking down. Any humor that might offend—that's to say, all real humor—was banished. A new humor sprang up. It didn't offend anyone, but it didn't amuse anyone, either. Nobody liked it, but that didn't matter. Vaudeville died. Burlesque died. Circuses died. The wonderful jokes that used to spread like wildfire . . ." Biddle sighed and peered at his glass. "It was phenomenal. You're too young to remember, James. We had jokes about everything under the sun, about insanity and disease, about sex and God and crime and marriage and—oh, nothing was sacred. And the wonder is, a lot of these jokes were good. Still are! I'm afraid it's a lost art. Everything's lost. Drink up, my boy. You're what's left."

Kinkaid threw down the remains of his drink and ordered another. There was a curious loss of control in his motor muscles. He looked at all the people, listened to the roar of their voices, and returned to the booth.

A naked woman sat in his lap.

"Coo, ducks," she said. "Have you heard the one about the married couple and the chimpanzee?"

"No," said Kinkaid. His mind was whirling now. The girl became two, then three. The voices faded.

". . . got into bed and here was this ape . . ."

He blinked furiously. Now there was a girl in Biddle's lap, and they were making those barking, Laff-Track noises.

"Get it?" said a voice.

Kinkaid felt a sudden hot rush of tears on his face. "No!" he cried, pressing his hot wet face between the girl's breasts. "No, I don't get it. *I don't get it!*"

A hand reached into his mind, then, and turned it off.

The morning light was cold and harsh. Kinkaid lay on the bed unmoving for a long time. When he did move, it was an agony. His head throbbed and his stomach felt as though someone had been punching it, hard, for hours.

It was not until after his shower that he remembered the previous night.

Excited, he dressed, breakfasted, and took the hi-speed belt to work.

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"You are seven minutes, twenty seconds late," said the Time Box.

"Up yours," said Kinkaid, happily.

He ran the gauntlet of eyes to his desk, took out his papers and sat down. A red bulb flashed.

Kinkaid walked back down the aisle toward the door marked: *William A. Biddle.* Biddle was seated behind his desk.

"Hi," said Kinkaid.

"You are late."

"I know. That absinthe must have got to me."

"Absinthe?"

"Maybe I didn't tell you, but I hadn't even tasted the stuff before last night. I'm sorry about what happened. Who took me home?"

"Kinkaid, I don't know what you're talking about."

"About last night. S.P.O.L." The corners of Kinkaid's lips curled upwards. "Anybody wanna buy a duck?"

Biddle's expression was grim.

"I'll be happy to give you a goose instead," said Kinkaid. "There, how's that? That's a joke, isn't it?"

"I couldn't say."

"Come on, Mister Biddle. I know I was a disappointment to you, but it was all so new. I didn't understand. I wanted to, I tried . . . I'm willing to learn."

Biddle said nothing.

"They're not going to hold it against me because I didn't laugh, are they?" Kinkaid found that his heart had begun to beat rapidly. "I didn't know how. But I do now. Listen. Ha! Ha-ha! *Ha-ha-ha—*"

"Kinkaid!"

"Yes, sir?"

"You're fired."

"What?" Kinkaid's mouth went dry. He stared at the stern man behind the desk and tried to remember how he looked with his tie loose and a naked woman in his lap. "Mister Biddle, I know the vote was against me. I know that. And I don't blame them. But, you can fix it, can't you?"

"Get out."

"Please! All I want is a second chance. Is that so much to ask? You people *lived* through the time, I didn't. I've got to learn."

"I don't know what you're babbling about, Kinkaid. But I warn you. If you repeat any of it to the authorities, they'll put you away."

Kinkaid stood there a moment, tense; then he sighed, turned around and walked quickly out of the building.

That night, and almost every night thereafter until the final demolition, he rode the belts to No Man's Land. He walked to where the ugly sightless buildings were, and he searched, but he could never find the building he wanted.

Sometimes he would stand perfectly still on the crumbling sidewalks, and listen. And once in a while it almost seemed that he could hear the distant laughter.

It was a lovely, desperate sound.

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CHARLES BEAUMONT: *THE MAGIC MAN*

A Personal Appreciation

by William F. Nolan

HE WAS AN ADVENTURER.

A thousand passions shaped his life. He was always discovering new ones, remembering old ones. My phone would ring at midnight in California: Chuck calling from Chicago to tell me he planned to spend the day with Ian Fleming and why not grab a plane and join them? By morning I was in Illinois. We flew to Europe that way, spurred to action by a wild Beaumontian plan to see the 1960 Grand Prix at Monte Carlo. ("I'll write it up for Playboy!" And he did.)

He loved King Kong, trains, pulp magazines, Vic and Sade, Oz, Steinbeck, old horror movies, late-night coffee shops . . . All his pores were open; he absorbed life with his body, mind and spirit. He moved through the world like a comet. This is not hyperbole; it is fact. Sleep was an enemy—to be endured for a few hours each night. Chuck was almost never at rest; there was so much to see, to learn, to experience, to share with others.

Racing driver, radio announcer, musician, actor, cartoonist, multilith operator, statistical typist, film critic, story analyst, book and magazine editor, literary agent, teacher at UCLA, freight expediter, the father of four children . . . he was all of these. But writing was the blood in his body, the stuff of dreams put to paper, the driving force which gave ultimate meaning to his life.

Chuck could never write fast enough to catch up with his ideas, and he always had many projects planned: a play with Richard Matheson, a novel of his youth, a World War I flying spectacular, a comedy record album with Paul DeWitt, a film on auto racing, a novelet about a cowboy he'd met in Missouri . . .

A technical virtuoso in prose, he utilized many styles, but the distinctive "Beaumont touch" was always evident, whether he was telling us about power-hungry Adam Cramer in *The Intruder,* jazzman Spoof Collins in *Black Country,* the perverted lovers of *The Crooked Man,* the tough stock car veteran in *A Death in the Country,* or the gentle little man who rode stone lions in *The Vanishing*

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American. And although he wrote in many fields, it was fantasy and science fiction which shaped him as a creative writer. "I lived in illiterate contentment until spinal meningitis laid me low in my twelfth year," he once declared. "Then I discovered Oz, Burroughs, Poe—and the jig was up."

He spent his childhood on Chicago's north side, and in Everett, Washington, with his aunts—publishing his own fan magazine, *Utopia*, in his early teens and writing countless letters to sf/fantasy publications. Radio work led to his leaving high school a year short of graduation for an acting career in California. It didn't jell, and soon he was inking cartoons for MGM in their animation studio and working as a part-time illustrator for FPCI (Fantasy Publ. Co.) in Los Angeles.

And starving.

His father obtained a job for him as a railroad clerk in Mobile, Alabama—where, at 19, he met Helen Broun, and scribbled in a notebook: "She's incredible. Intelligent *and* beautiful. This is the girl I'm going to marry!"

When Chuck moved back to Los Angeles, Helen went with him as his wife.

I met him (briefly) for the first time late in 1952, at Universal. Ray Bradbury, then working there on *It Came From Outer Space*, introduced us. I recall Chuck's sad face and ink-stained hands; he wanted to *write* for Universal, not run a multilith machine in the music department. Ray was certain of the Beaumont talent, and had been helping Chuck with his early work—as he later helped me. The first Beaumont story had already appeared (in *Amazing*) and within a few more months, when I saw Chuck again, half a dozen others had been sold. Forry Ackerman, then Chuck's agent, got us together early in 1953, and our friendship was immediate and lasting.

I found, in Chuck Beaumont, a warmth, a vitality, an honesty and depth of character which few possess. And (most necessary) a wild, wacky, irreverent sense of humor; Chuck could always laugh at himself.

The Beaumonts were in disasterous shape in '53; Chuck's typewriter was in hock and the gas had been shut off in his apartment. I remember his breaking the seal and turning it back on; his son, Chris, required heat, and damn the Gas Co.! Chris got what he needed. Later, as his other children, Cathy, Elizabeth and Gregory came along, he loved them with equal intensity. Chuck's love was a well that never ran dry; it nourished those around him. No one was happier at a friend's success; Chuck had a personal concern for what you were, what you were doing, where you were headed in life. He would encourage, bully, insult,

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charm—extracting the best from those he loved. You were continually extending yourself to keep up with him; happily, he kept all of his friends at full gallop.

Chuck's last hardcover book was *Remember, Remember* . . . and there is so *much* to remember about Charles Beaumont: the frenzied, nutty nights when we plotted Mickey Mouse adventures for the Disney magazines . . . the bright, hot, exciting racing weekends at Palm Springs, Torrey Pines, Pebble Beach . . . the whirlwind trips to Paris and Nassau and New York . . . the sessions on the set at *Twilight Zone* when he'd exclaim, "I write it and they create it in three dimensions. God, but it's *magic*!" . . . the walking tour we made of his old neighborhood in Chicago . . . the day my first story was published ("See, Bill, you *can* do it! You're on the way!") . . . the enthusiastic phone calls, demanding news ("Goodies for ole Bewmarg!") . . . the fast, machine-gun rattle of his typewriter as I talked to Helen in the kitchen while he worked in the den . . . the rush to the newsstand for the latest Beaumont story . . .

He was 25 when he wrote *Black Country* and began his big success with *Playboy* and his close friendship with editor Ray Russell. He was 38 when he died, after a three-year illness. It is trite to say, but true, that a good writer lives in his work. Charles Beaumont was a very good writer indeed. His full potential was never realized; he might well have become a great one.

The Magic Man is no longer with us, but his magic still dazzles, erupts and sparkles from a printed page, shocks us, surprises us, makes us laugh and cry—and, finally, tells us a little more about the world we live—and die—in.

That's all any writer can hope to do. Chuck did that.

For us, the Beaumont magic will always be there.

A CHARLES BEAUMONT INDEX: 1951-1965

Compiled by William F. Nolan

● *SF AND FANTASY STORIES COLLECTED IN BOOK FORM**

THE MAGIC MAN—Gold Medal, 1965
The Last Caper
The New People
The Vanishing American
The Monster Show
The Dark Music
Perchance to Dream
The Crooked Man
Last Rites
all reprinted from earlier collections

**All of Beaumont's other anthology appearances involve stories which may be found in his collections. He edited one SF/Fantasy anthology: THE FIEND IN YOU, Ballantine, 1962.*

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NIGHT RIDE AND OTHER JOURNEYS—Bantam, 1960
Father, Dear Father
Song for a Lady
The Guests of Chance (w/Oliver)
The Howling Man

YONDER—Bantam, 1958
You Can't Have Them All
Fritzchen
Place of Meeting
A World of Differents
Anthem
In His Image
The Jungle
The Quadriopticon
Hair of the Dog
The Beautiful People
Mother's Day
Traumerei
The New Sound

THE HUNGER AND OTHER STORIES—G. P. Putnam, 1957 (& Bantam, 1959)
Free Dirt
The Customers
Last Night the Rain

TIME TO COME—Edited by August Derleth—Farrar, Straus and Young, 1954
Keeper of the Dream

THE BEST FROM FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION: Fifth Series—Edited by Anthony Boucher—Doubleday, 1956
The Last Word (w/Chad Oliver)

THE 9TH ANNUAL OF THE YEAR'S BEST SF—Edited by Judith Merril—Simon and Schuster, 1964
Mourning Song

MAN AGAINST TOMORROW—Edited by William F. Nolan—Avon, 1965
Mass for Mixed Voices

◉ *SF AND FANTASY MAGAZINE STORIES NOT COLLECTED OR ANTHOLOGIZED*

Amazing: The Devil You Say—Jan. '51
The Mag. of Fantasy and SF: I, Claude—(w/Oliver)—Feb. '56
(plus a film column, "The Science Screen"—every third month, Sept. '55 to Dec. '57—and a TV column, "The Seeing I" in Dec. '59.)
Gamma: Something in the Earth—Issue 2, 1963; Auto-Suggestion—Sept. '65
Imagination: Elegy—Feb. '53
Nugget: The Baron's Secret—(as "Michael Phillips")—Aug. '60
Playboy: Sorcerer's Moon—July '59; Blood Brother—April '61
Road & Track: Beyond the Fire: A Fable—Jan. '59
Rogue: Gentlemen, Be Seated—(as "C. B. Lovehill")—April '60

○ *SF AND FANTASY FILMS*

QUEEN OF OUTER SPACE—Allied Artists, 1958
THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF THE BROTHERS GRIMM—MGM, 1962
BURN, WITCH, BURN—(w/Richard Matheson)—Amer.-International, 1964
THE PREMATURE BURIAL—(w/Ray Russell)—Amer.-International, 1963
THE HAUNTED VILLAGE—Amer.-International, 1963
THE SEVEN FACES OF DR. LAO—MGM, 1964
MASQUE OF THE RED DEATH—Amer.-International, 1964

Note: This basic sf/fantasy index makes no attempt to include his credits for television, nor does it reflect his output in the automotive field, his novels, or non-fantasy fiction and essays.

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Mr. Thomas's previous appearances here (THE FACE IS FAMILIAR, *April 1966;* LUANA, *Sept. 1966*) *have been humorous and horrific tales of men driven to desperate and unusual lengths to get what they want. In the same vein—and at the same time completely different—is his latest story.*

". . . BUT FOR THE GRACE OF GOD"

by Gilbert Thomas

AND SO HE WAS ALONE. HE WAS always alone. But ready for adventure. On the *qui vive.* The rain beat against the glass, and he saw her arms go by in the gloom. They were preternaturally white, slender, and her legs were slender, cutting out of one of the new short skirts. He thought of Dylan Thomas and his lifelong search to find naked women in wet mackintoshes. It was surprising she wasn't wearing a raincoat in this downpour, not even carrying an umbrella. He thought of Katherine Mansfield and her young man carrying an egg up to the girl of his choice, saying, "You dropped this . . ."

There was always a way to meet girls. Although Katherine Mansfield's young man had been spying on the girl of his choice through binoculars, if memory served, thus knowing when and where she bought her dairy goods. But the girl with the arms and legs was getting away from him; he pressed his nose to the glass and saw her take a puddle; lightly, lightly, she

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seemed to hover in air as she floated over it; likely a ballet dancer. He'd never had a ballet dancer. They were reputed to be choice, of necessity young; *rats* they called them—certainly this was not a prima ballerina of indeterminate years. He must not let her get away.

He left his hat and coat in the cafe, signalling the waiter he would return, and made for the street. A light mist in the air. The steamed glass rolling with old drops had been deceiving. The rain was over.

"Pardon me, Miss, but you dropped this . . ." It was a dime. It often worked; at least it broke the ice and confused them. No one turns down money. As she wasn't carrying a handbag he wondered if he could get away with it, but somehow this wasn't the occasion for him to say: "Is there any reason why we shouldn't know each other?"

He was panting. He'd had to move fast to overtake her. She seemed to skim the ground. Ballerinas were noted for being extraordinarily lithe.

Her face seemed to catch all the shadows of dusk, and her eyes were notably large and shining. Choice. He tried desperately to make his face warm and appealing. She smiled and took the dime. "Thank you," she said and her voice wasn't particularly nice, rather metallic and squeaky. Perhaps she had laryngitis. Prancing around in this weather. Likely perspiring from rehearsal; young people were always running out in the rain, something romantic about it and don't give a damn, especially people in show business.

"I don't wish to appear presumptuous, but aren't you in show business?" She smiled. "I thought so—I was just having dinner when I saw you drop that—must have popped out of your pocket—" she seemed to accept this, which wasn't too bright on her part "—I thought it might be important; would you care to join me; looks like it might rain again."

"Thank you," she smiled.

Well, this was going to be easier than he thought, but ease didn't make him any the less grateful. Returning to the restaurant, he signalled the waiter to set an extra place and take the young lady's order. What magnificent arms she had, such slender fingers. They pulled her little gold pen down on its stretch-cord from her blouse, and on a tiny square of blue paper produced from a pleated-pocket, she wrote *Steak Tartare*— delicate filigree, crossed 7s if there had been 7s—*Nothing to Drink*. Beautiful. Well, she wasn't a mute—"Thank you," she said. What a singularly uninteresting voice. Often those with an accent sounded better than the landed English. Perhaps French, with that figure, but more likely Baltic.

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They were reputed to make excellent ballerinas, perhaps in this country with some troupe from behind the Iron Curtain. He thought it best not to press her. She had followed him without knowing she had been invited to dinner; obviously she had been attracted. Taking the dime—perhaps she thought it was an old American custom. Don't try to second guess. Be grateful.

"Steak Tartare, Nothing to Drink," was likely all she knew how to write in English. *Muffins, Tea* for breakfast, perhaps *Hamburger, Coffee* for lunch; foreigners were always trying the hamburgers, especially show people. They lived on them, sacks of hamburgers and cartons of hot coffee backstage during rehearsals. Ballerinas were reported to be extraordinarily healthy, it must be all that exercise. Big eaters, too.

"Can you understand what I'm saying?" he said, and she smiled. Well, that takes care of that; I can tell her the truth. It was a relief. They could skip the small-talk about motion pictures and movie stars and international politics, war and religion, sex and disaster. Get down to brass tacks. He relaxed. Often, with girls, when he arrived at the moment of truth, it was more than they could take. He didn't mind that she couldn't talk. It would give him practice. All to the good. He remembered how difficult it was, talking, learning to talk. English was a difficult language, even more difficult than Russian, they say. He would try his fund of Russian on her: "Das vidanya?" No response, but she smiled. "Dnepropetrovsk?" Nothing. Well, hell, countries all over the place over there, no one knew where Liechtenstein was or what language they spoke. What difference did it make where she came from? She was learning to write. It didn't pay to be a snob; not about attainments. What had F. Scott Fitzgerald written about the poor and the dense, "Perhaps they weren't born with your advantages."

"Thank you," she squeaked when the waiter returned with her Steak Tartare. That proves she's a foreigner; no one thanks a waiter. But well-brought up, well-behaved, extraordinary bosom. For such a slender girl. Has to do with the pectorals, constant exercise, stretching.

"I'll talk to you, if you don't mind." He managed his warmest smile. "It doesn't matter if you understand—they say the tone of the voice is everything anyway; you don't have to know the language." But she had already started on her food, scraping the raw egg on top to one side and working on the meat. Lusty girl, ballerinas were supposed to be like that, taking life as they found it and taking it whole. No frou-frou outside the tu-tu, he winced at his little joke. He rubbed his hand across his shirt

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front, a nervous gesture; he'd have to get over that. Nervous tics would never do; people were always doing odd things with their hands. It must be difficult to be an actor and have to plan in advance what you were going to do with them. He rubbed his hand across his shirt front; must stop that. What truly lovely arms she had.

"Thank you," in that miserable voice like dry leaves; but what a front, pointed and moving every time she looked up to speak her little piece by rote. It would be nicer if she had a larger vocabulary. Lousy tone or no. She certainly was packing away that steak. Raw meat. Well, it had lots of pepper ground on it; he guessed that made it palatable. They say it was John Barrymore's favorite dish; to his way of thinking it always seemed an affectation, like you were trying to prove something. Yet the Japanese ate their fish raw and those who've tried it say it's good. If the fish is fresh, and that's the only kind the Japanese eat. He would like to relax in one of those Japanese bath houses where the whole family sits around scrubbing each other's backs. But that would never be.

Why did she say it that last time? He must have been—too openly—admiring her charms. Well, at least she was direct, didn't blush. Took it as her due and uttered her little phrase. It was likely her stage experience; she was used to being looked at. Too bad her legs were under the table, curved like slender scimitars; well, there would be time for that later. His constant use of *well* bothered him; have to watch that. Another evidence of tic. Trying to make your mouth say what you wanted it to say wasn't easy; speech patterns begin in the mind; he rubbed his hand across his shirt front.

"You can call me Jim. Jim?" But she merely nodded and kept shoveling in the meat. Well, you could stretch a lust for life too far. But perhaps it was because he wasn't used to seeing a ballerina eat. They must work like stevedores, sweating like pigs in their leotards, special stockings on their legs to keep them warm, hand-knitted things like two big sleeves; he'd seen pictures of Sona Osato. Wonder what ever happened to her. Gorgeous girl. He'd never seen her dance, but anyone who looked like that, hair all pulled back, boneless, smooth as an Oriental muscle, she must have moved around pretty good. The DeMille girl said so and it must be true.

She certainly was enjoying that mess. You'd think she'd take a little wine with it. Beer. They don't have to worry about fat, hangovers, they work it off in the gym. Six hours on the bar before a performance, then an hour or two on stage going through God only knows what kind of contortions; yet they do it all so smoothly you'd never

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know they had a joint. Close up they thump around a lot and you can see that little flesh-patch made like a lady's rouge-pat that they place over their very center so when they raise their legs and twist them behind their neck the authorities won't be outraged. It pays to sit back a few rows and not try to show off in the dress-circle. Well, he had trouble with food too. But no need to go into that now. Tics and devices, we all have our little ways, cachets and methods for getting on in the world. Oh, don't we now. And they must be kept secret; only with this girl—how comfortable it was to be with her—you could hew to the truth. Perhaps if husbands and wives didn't speak the same language they could level with each other. Well, marriage was out of the question. Most girls he knew were stricken when they faced the truth; which was why, eventually, he was always alone. There goes that damned hand again.

Her fingers seemed to stick to the tablecloth. It was getting awfully lumpy around her plate; she noticed it and tried to straighten it out with her elbows, a charming gesture. Her grace more than made up for the speed with which she attacked her dish. At least keeping her mouth full precluded her thanking him for anything in that rusty voice. Although he would have liked her to sit up straight and point at him again, everything moving under that middy-blouse. Haven't seen one of them in ages. Arches over the points, then drops straight down, most becoming. What with the new short skirts it made a fetching costume. He would have to tell her about himself.

But first he would have to get her to his apartment. Keep talking, that's the ticket, he would think of something.

She wasn't listening; the meat was almost gone.

"I'm glad the waiter can't overhear this conversation. I'm trying to smile. It isn't easy. You'll find out. Some girls would think it's a treat. Am I keeping my voice warm? Yes, you're looking up, interested. No wonder, the meat's all gone. Strange how your face keeps catching the shadows, like it was alive, but of course it is alive, lovely but different. It must be the Slavic strain; a Chinese girl always catches the shadows in her eyes; each country has its own ways. No one better than another, each one different—but your being in show business, you know this. You must have travelled all over the world, Paris, London, Rome, and into those odd out-of-the-way places down-at-the-heel ballet troupes are always playing, calling themselves the Ballet Russe de Something; I'm not concentrating on what I'm saying or I'd have given your troupe a better name; I'm practicing on you; it isn't easy for me to keep go-

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ing on like this; especially right after dinner."

She seemed to be waiting. Content. With the language barrier he couldn't pass her the usual nonsense about coming up to my place for a drink, or I'm expecting a telephone call, or I promised to look in on my mother—you remind me so much of her—(although this wasn't working so well anymore); he decided on the direct approach, paying the waiter, taking his hat and coat, putting them on, taking her arm as they hit the street. It was surprisingly firm, but that was to be expected in an athlete. He was now reasonably sure what her legs would be like. The arm was like polished bone. There were no lumps. They couldn't afford to become musclebound. He would have to take a chance on her not having an evening performance or a late rehearsal. He understood they docked their pay if they missed a performance. He had once been out with an Ice-Capette and it had been true with her. But of course there were so many girls skating around in an ice show no one would know if one was missing. Besides, they all look alike. Wholesome. That evening hadn't turned out too well either; again he had made the mistake of trying to level with a girl. At least she hadn't screamed. It always frightened him when they screamed.

She was coming along docilely; she evidently understood the situation and was making it easy for him. She certainly did move well, light as a feather. Her feet hardly touched the ground. In the elevator and up to seven, down to 714, key in the lock, open, in, and home-free. She refused the drink with a smile, but moved about the room, curious, looking at things; well, she was from a foreign country and likely all this was new to her, how the Americans live. If she only knew! But at least she was taking an interest. It was an old-fashioned apartment, without drapes. She stood at the window, looking out into the night and the rain, which had started again. He talked, a drink in his hand, trembling:

"Nothing is the way it seems," he said. "No one knows for sure what's going on. People are better actors than we think. What I am, I can't tell you. Not yet. How it happened: who knows? What I have to do—I have to do to protect myself. Preserve myself . . ."

Touching the blinds with her fingertips, she pulled them down with a graceful gesture.

"I can see you're a sensible girl. Perhaps you're the one who will understand." Seated, he stared at his books. "I'm not what I am because I want to be this way; none of us want to be the way we are." Those damned books—what a substitute! "The world, pressures, environment, evolution—even the weather—they all play their part

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in making us what we are. Half the people you meet aren't human, they just look that way." He slopped his drink on his shirt, regained control and went on: "Half the young girls want to look like sex-bombs and half of them do; the other half have to make do with character—and which half is happier? more content? They say the goal is not the prize but the way there. That we're all in a state of becoming. Men at one time wanted to look like Clark Gable, now the young ones want to look like apes—but that's another story: and all of it a story of survival." But her back was turned; he closed his mouth. She took off her shoes.

"Men will do anything, women will do anything to claim their mate. Life—death has nothing to do with it. You have no control. You change. Hips grow smaller, hips get bigger. In just two generations the looks of the people in this country have improved immeasurably; and that's not all . . ."

He had slipped into his professorial tone, James Mason, cool but strained—he heard but couldn't stop—as she eased lightly from foot to foot.

"There is a protective coloration in animals that hides them from their enemies—a cactus in the desert that looks like rocks because it has no needles to protect it; a fish that looks like a floating leaf till it spits to bring down some unsuspecting insect; insects that look like hornets—the clearwing moth contracting its abdomen over the generations till it's pointed and sharp and ringed round with black-and-yellow circles—a hornet to the life and things leave it alone; butterflys with heads at both ends to confuse the enemy—bite off the wrong end and they flutter away safe, if off balance; this isn't funny—a matter of life-and-death."

But as usual it was as though he were talking to himself.

"Thank you," she said at the window, turning to face him. Well, she was trying to communicate with him in the only way she knew how. God, what a voice.

He tried again: "Heike crabs of Japan have the configuration of a samurai warrior's face worked into their shell, and they're found at the very spot an army of samurai drowned themselves after suffering defeat at the hands of the enemy—and to this day those crabs are safe: no Japanese will touch them. Do you understand? Short men want to be tall, tall girls want to be short. The Australian seahorse has imitations of three different kinds of seaweed sprouting from its body. Flowers fly away and the sour drongo of Central Africa is mimicked by several savory birds, so successfully that when presented to hungry cats they escape with their lives . . ." But carried away by his explanation he forgot his self-control and sipped his drink through his shirt.

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Instantly she was on him, her tongue stinging him into paralysis; then laying her eggs in him she took off her middy-blouse to flex her four other legs, two coiled into a brassiere. "Thank you," they said, rubbing together, dryly, cicada-like, "Thank you." And ripping off her skirt and now down on all eights, she sprang for the wall and raced to the ceiling where she stood for long moments, absolutely still. He would remain alive and unmoving until the grubs hatched, at which time they would carefully consume his body, excluding the vital organs, leaving those for the very last to keep the body fresh. I am benign, he thought, his eyes glazing with pain in the half-light, while the face he presented to the world continued to smile on top.

Back on the street other men tried to pick her up, but now she wasn't interested.

Blending into the crowd entering the subway.

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SCIENCE

NON-TIME TRAVEL

by Isaac Asimov

MY FATHER WAS BROUGHT UP IN the sternest of traditions, and is to this day able to quote Biblical passages of incredible length, word for word, together with several reams of Talmudic commentary on each verse. Since all this is in Hebrew, of which I understand only an occasional word, it does me no good, except for what spiritual edification osmoses inward as a result of hearing the sound of the sonorous syllables of the Language of the Prophets and Patriarchs.

However, all those Biblical and Talmudic passages have served to inculcate in my father a lofty code of virtue which he has tried for many years (with mixed results) to pass on to me. One of the fruits of that code, for instance, is my father's complete inability to make use of strong language. In fact, all I have ever heard him say, under even the most extreme provocation, is a phrase which, being translated, means, literally, "Eighteen black years!"

I believe that this represents a wish that the person or object at whom this phrase is aimed will suffer eighteen consecutive years of misfortune, but my father refuses to confirm this, considering it an unfit subject for discussion. And when I ask him the significance of "eighteen" and suggest that "seventeen" might be sufficient, he turns away in sorrow, convinced that I am hopelessly sunk in frivolity.

The saddest part of the matter, alas, is that this inconvenient habit of his of speaking without colorful phrases, is something he has indeed managed to pass on to me. I consider even "eighteen black years" to be a rather harsh and unwarranted remark, and, when strongly moved, I usually give vent to an "Oh, dear me!" or an "Oh, goodness gracious!" I may even, in transports of fury, go so far as a "Good Heavens!"

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This has had a serious effect on me, aside from the fact that I am occasionally the recipient of a dubious glance or two. When someone makes a remark that shows him to be particularly ignorant of some very simple aspect of science*, a person other than myself could respond with a vile word or two and, unburdening his soul in this manner, pass on to other things. I cannot. Helpless to relieve my feelings with an expletive, I am forced to say, "Well, no, that's not quite right. Here, let me try to explain—"

And thus my way of life has been forced upon me.

I'll give you an example. Occasionally, I have been on the scene when an individual has discovered that in crossing the Pacific Ocean from Tokyo to San Francisco, there comes a place where you "go backwards in time one day." A look of heavy concentration may come over this person and then the grinding gears produce an awe-inspiring thought:

"Listen," he says, "if you keep on going around the Earth west to east time after time after time, you go backwards one day each time, and if you go fast enough you can keep from growing older and live forever."

I then search for the proper remark and failing to find it, I am forced to say, "Well, no, that's not quite right. Here, let me try to explain—"

We can begin by making things very simple. Let us suppose we have frozen an instant of time. The Earth has stopped in mid-spin at just the moment when the Sun is crossing the meridian over your head so that it is exactly noon at the point at which you are standing. Furthermore, the day of the week is (pardon me, while I toss my seven-sided coin) Tuesday.

Very well, then, it's noon on Tuesday where you're standing and for our purposes here, it doesn't matter where that point is. Call it Home.

Since we've frozen an instant of time and the Earth is standing still, it is going to be noon on Tuesday indefinitely at Home. You can wander away wherever you want and when you come back the Sun will still be crossing the meridian and it will still be noon on Tuesday. This will give us a chance to experiment at leisure.

Suppose you travel due east from Home. As you travel east along Earth's curved surface, the Sun will seem to move to the west because of the very existence of that curvature. The further you move east, the further the Sun seems to sink in the west, till finally, if you move far enough eastward, the Sun touches the western horizon.

We associate this apparent westward journey of the Sun from merid-

A "simple aspect of science" may be defined as one which, through good fortune, I happen to understand.

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ian to western horizon with that of a forward-moving time from noon to evening, so we would naturally assume that as we travel east it is getting later in the day.

But we have frozen time. The Sun is in actuality (according to the mythical situation we have arranged) motionless over the meridian of Home. Therefore, the change in time as we travel eastward is an illusion born of our convention that the apparent westward motion of the Sun *must* mean that time is moving forward.

How did that convention arise? Well, let's consider—

The basic and original concept of time is physiological; it is our own sense of duration, our own sense that something is happening and *then* something else is happening and *then* something else is happening and so on.

Of course, our sense of duration is strongly influenced by environment. A period of time at a dull lecture seems to stretch out tremendously. The same period of time (as judged by someone else) spent with a charming girl is alarmingly brief.

You might, of course, take your own sense of duration as an absolute standard of time measurement. If you feel that the lecture endured long and the girl's stay did not, why accept someone else's opinion that the two intervals were about equal in duration?

Alas, you must, if you are outvoted. If there is to be cooperation in the world, and if people are to do anything at all together, they had better drown their own particular senses of duration and choose some average that will suit them all as well as possible. The trick is to choose some change which seems constant in rate over long periods and to use that as a commonly agreed upon measure of time.

The first such steady change available to primitive man, when he began to feel the need of an objective measure of time, was the steady and constant progression, day after day, of the Sun from eastern horizon to western horizon.

Of course, the Sun's apparent motion is not really a fundamental phenomenon. It depends on the accidental fact that Earth is rotating on its axis at a rate that does not match its revolution about the Sun. Furthermore, this motion is a useful measure of time, only because the Earth's rate of rotation happens to be virtually constant.

Yet it must be pointed out that the apparent progression of the Sun from east to west takes place at a constant rate *only when the observer does not change his position, east and west, on the Earth's surface.* (He can move north and south all he wants.)

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As soon as an observer moves east or west, he adds to the apparent east-to-west motion of the Sun that results from the Earth's west-to-east rotation, an additional change that is the reflection of his own motion. And since the observer's own motion is bound to be erratic, the progression of the Sun is no longer constant to the moving man, and that progression may therefore no longer be a useful measure of time.

To be sure, it is not quite as bad as all that. Ordinary motion, such as walking to the post office, or driving to work, is over distances so short and at a rate so slow compared to the planet's rotational speed, that the irregularity introduced into the Sun's apparent motion is small enough to be ignored. Until a quarter-century ago, in fact, motion-induced irregularities were of importance only under highly specialized and exceptional conditions.

Since World War II, however, jet-plane travel has become commonplace. Travel over long distances at great speeds is indulged in. The result is that the apparent motion of the Sun across the sky for such travellers has no reasonable relation whatever to one's sense of duration or to the time measurements conducted by a stay-at-home individual.

Since the traveller tries to adjust his activities to the Sun's position at all times, partly out of habit and partly out of a desire or need to synchronize his activity with those of the natives of the place he has reached, he tries to accept the fact that it is dinner time just because the Sun is on the western horizon. Since his own internal clock knows it *isn't* dinner time there is a conflict that causes the traveller to feel rotten. And so our age gets a new disease, the Jet-set Jitters.

The progression of the Sun is not, of course, the only method we have of telling time. In fact, when it comes to telling time to better than the nearest hour, we've *got* to use something other than the Sun. We use the constant periodic motion of a hair spring in a wrist-watch, for instance.

Not only does the wrist-watch tell us the time to the second (if it is working well), but it is not significantly affected by our motion, or change in position, even as a result of jet travel. Our wrist-watch will measure a time lapse roughly equivalent to our sense of duration whether that time lapse has taken place while we were in our bed at Home, or while we travelled half around the Earth in a jet plane.

And yet do we go by our wrist-watch? No, we do not. Synchronization with the activities of the natives which, in turn, are matched to the progression of the Sun, is a matter of overriding concern. If we jet from New York to London, we ignore our correct wrist-watch; we change its setting to match the position of the Sun, and it's hello, Jitters, hello.

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Indeed, think of how convenient things might be if we lived underground and never saw the Sun. It would be simplicity itself (in principle) to set up a single light-dark alternation for the entire planet, so that it could then be noon everywhere at the same time. We could then travel quickly or slowly through such an underground world, and over distances that were large or small, yet never experience any of the time-problems we experience on the earth's surface.

In other words, then, our time problems on Earth arise entirely out of the fact that we are living on a spinning sphere and have gotten into the habit of matching our behavior to the relative position of ourselves and the Sun. Our problems are a matter of convention only and have nothing to do with time itself as a physical phenomenon.

Nothing we can do on the surface of the Earth does more than play games with convention; nothing we can do affects the steady flow of physical time.

Forget, then, about time travel. That is not involved in the slightest. Forget about time as a physical phenomenon. Think only of the convention of the Sun's apparent movement and let's see how we can handle that convention in such a way as to keep us from becoming involved in contradictions and paradoxes.

Let's start again at Home at a frozen instant of time at noon, Tuesday, and travel eastward. Every fifteen degrees we travel will make Sun-based time one hour later (see THE TIMES OF OUR LIVES, *F & SF*, May 1967).

It is therefore 1 P.M. Tuesday at 15° eastward, 2 P.M. Tuesday at 30° eastward, and so on, until we reach 12 P.M.—that is, midnight—when we have travelled 180° eastward and have completed a journey that is exactly half-way around the world on the particular parallel of latitude we are following. (The same holds true for any parallel of latitude, of course. Movement north and south from one parallel of latitude to another, does not affect Sun-based time.)

Back we go Home, where time's freeze means it is still noon on Tuesday. Now we travel due westward. As we travel westward, the Sun seems to move eastward in the sky and if we go far enough westward it will be seen at the eastern horizon. In short, Sun-based time will be earlier and earlier as we go westward.

Again, each 15° stretch that we travel westward makes the Sun-based time one hour earlier. It is 11 A.M. Tuesday at 15° westward; 10 A.M. Tuesday at 30° westward, and so on, until we reach a time of midnight when we travel 180° westward and have completed a journey that is

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again exactly half-way around the world on the particular parallel of latitude we are following.

This appears delightfully consistent. Whether we travel 180° due east or 180° due west we end up at exactly the same place, the point exactly opposite Home on its parallel of latitude. (If Home is Boston, for instance—42.3° North Latitude, 71.1° West Longitude—then 180° either due east or due west is near the town of Pai-yun-o-po in Inner Mongolia.) And whether we go due east or due west, it turns out to be midnight at that 180° opposite point.

But wait, heave no sigh of relief, for we are in trouble!

Look more closely at the eastern progression from Home. As we travel over 15° intervals, we move to 1 P.M. Tuesday, 2 P.M. Tuesday, 3 P.M. Tuesday until we finally reach, at 180° eastward, the midnight that follows one minute after 11:59 P.M. Tuesday. It is the midnight that forms the boundary between Tuesday and Wednesday. Let's call it: 12 P.M. Tuesday/Wednesday.

If we move westward from Home, however, the progression is 11 A.M. Tuesday, 10 A.M. Tuesday, 9 A.M. Tuesday, until we finally reach, at 180° westward, the midnight that just precedes by one minute the time of 12:01 A.M. Tuesday. That is the midnight that separates Monday from Tuesday and we can call it: 12 P.M. Monday/Tuesday.

In short, in travelling either east or west we find that it is indeed midnight at the 180° line in either case, but it is a *different midnight* in each case. The westward travel takes us to the 180° line at a time which, apparently, is 24 hours *earlier* than that same 180° line is when reached by eastward travel.

This is a paradox that is caused, let me repeat, not by the nature of time itself, but by the conventions of Sun-based time only. It is a man-made paradox!

The paradox gets worse if we continue our travel past the 180° line. Suppose we have reached the 180° line travelling eastward and find it is 12 P.M. Tuesday/Wednesday and continue travelling eastward another 15°. Judging by the Sun (which is on the other side of the Earth and is not visible, but whose position can be calculated), another hour has been gained and it is now 1 A.M. Wednesday. Another 15° eastward brings us to 2 A.M. Wednesday and so on.

Finally, when we have gone 180° past the 180° line, and have travelled 360° eastward altogether, we find we have made a complete circle and have returned Home. By that time, we calculate the time to be noon on Wednesday. In other words, in travelling 360° eastward

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(and returning Home), we have passed over twenty-four 15° intervals and considered ourselves to have moved forward in time one hour for each of those intervals, and twenty-four hours (or one full day) forward for the complete circuit. Hence, while we considered it to be noon on Tuesday when we left Home, we considered it noon on Wednesday when we returned Home.

Yet we have been assuming frozen time. The Earth has not moved; the Sun is still where it was.

Next, suppose you had travelled westward instead of eastward. Now you would have counted one hour earlier at each 15° interval, reaching 12 P.M. Monday/Tuesday at the 180° line and 11 P.M. Monday when you had reached 15° west of it, then 10 P.M. Monday, 9 P.M. Monday until when you reached Home again, you could consider it noon on Monday.

Imagine, then, three men at Home. One stays Home, one travels eastward at a constant speed, and one travels westward at a constant speed. The two travellers return Home at the same moment. The one who has not left Home says, "It is still noon on Tuesday." The one who travelled eastward says, "It is noon on Wednesday". The one who travelled westward says, "It is noon on Monday."*

Furthermore, if our travellers keep on travelling at constant speed in the same direction, they will continue periodically to meet at Home. Each time they meet, the eastward traveller will add a day, the westward traveller will subtract a day, and the stay-at-home will insist on an unchanged day.

The situation would not be altered, in essence, if the travellers went at unequal speeds, or each at varying speeds, just as long as one moved generally eastward and the other generally westward.

You might wonder if there would be a difference if we allowed for the fact that the Earth is rotating and that time is not actually frozen. —No! The rotating Earth would advance time for all three individuals, the stay-at-home and the two travellers, but superimposed on that advancing time which all three would experience equally, there would be a day added for each circle of the earth by the eastward traveller and a day subtracted for each circle of the earth by the westward traveller.

How's that for a paradox? Well, to repeat once more, it is a man-made paradox based on a man-made convention of Sun-based time. To correct it, one needs only adjust the convention properly.

I believe that Edgar Allan Poe wrote a comic farce based on a situation like the one described here.

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How is that done?

Suppose we fix the time on any part of the Earth as it would be calculated travelling east or west from Home *by whichever route is shorter*. Continuing to use frozen time, let's leave Home at noon on Tuesday and travel 90° eastward (crossing six 15° sections). If we cross six 15° sections, we move six hours forward and, on arriving at our destination, we find the time to be 6 P.M. Tuesday.

We might also leave Home at noon on Tuesday and reach the same point by travelling 270° westward (eighteen 15° sections). If we then move eighteen hours backward, we find the time to be 6 P.M. Monday at our destination.

In this case, since the 90° eastward trip was shorter than the 270° westward trip, it is the decision of the former that counts. It is 6 P.M. Tuesday, whether you travel eastward or westward. The same sort of decision can be made for any other combinations of east travel versus west travel.

Consider now, that the eastward trip is the shorter for all points up to 180° eastward of Home; the westward trip is the shorter for all points up to 180° westward of Home. It is precisely at the 180° line, which is the same whether you travel east or west, that there is a conflict.

If you travel eastward to a point just short of the 180° line you will find it 11:59 P.M. Tuesday. If you travel westward to a point, just short of the 180° mark you will find it 12:01 A.M. Tuesday. If, still moving eastward, the eastward traveller now crosses the 180° line, he must suddenly abandon his own calculations and accept those of the westward traveller. Instead of reaching 12:01 A.M. Wednesday as his own calculations would tell him, he finds himself at 12:01 A.M. Tuesday, as the other's calculation would have it. The eastward traveller moves back in time twenty-four hours by crossing the 180° line.

Similarly, the westward traveller who crosses the 180° line, while still moving west, must abandon his own calculations for those of the eastward traveller. Instead of finding it 11:59 P.M. Monday, as his own calculations would have it, he finds it 11:59 P.M. Tuesday, as the eastward traveller would insist. The westward traveller, in moving west across the 180° line, moves forward in time twenty-four hours.

It is this moving forward or backward, a whole day at a time that, to the casual observer, seems to introduce the possibility of a paradox. A day has been "gained" or it has been "lost." You have grown "a day younger" or "a day older."

Nonsense! That trick about crossing the 180° line is designed to *prevent* a paradox—the very paradox I mentioned earlier in the article,

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in which eastward travellers move a day forward each time they circle the Earth, as compared with a motionless observer, and westward travellers move a day backward.

With the modified convention of the 180° line, the situation is as follows: The eastward traveller moves 1 hour forward with each 15° he covers, and has moved 24 hours forward, little by little, by the time he has covered 360° and returned Home. *But* he has moved 24 hours backward, all at once, the instant he crossed the 180° line and that neatly cancelled the gradual forward change of the eastward progression. Having moved forward 24 hours little by little and 24 hours backward all at once, he returns Home with no change in time and finds it is still noon on Tuesday as the stay-at-home insists.

Similarly, the westward traveller moves 1 hour backward for each 15° he covers, moving 24 hours backward when he has covered 360° and returned Home. *But* he has moved 24 hours forward, all at once, the instant he crossed the 180° line and that change is cancelled. He, too, agrees it is noon on Tuesday.

In fact, no matter how many times the travellers circle the Earth, and no matter what their direction of travel, no paradox of time measurement will exist as long as the 24-hour jump exists at the 180° line. Nor is this altered in a steadily rotating Earth where time is not frozen. Without the jump at the 180° line, the paradox *would* exist, and jet-age travel would become a jungle of confusion.

But where should the 180° line be? Home is where your heart is, and for every different Home there is a different 180° line and my Home and my 180° line are just as good as yours, aren't they?

Yes, but if the same 180° line isn't adopted for everybody, then everything tumbles into confusion anyway.

As it happens, the 19th Century saw an international agreement on the subject of longitude. In 1884, an international conference was held in Washington to decide on a universally-agreed upon Prime Meridian (see GHOST LINES IN THE SKY, *F & SF*, May 1964).

Since Great Britain was the dominant maritime power of the time, it seemed logical to set the 0° longitude mark on the meridian passing through the Greenwich Observatory in London. This is the "Greenwich meridian." This agreement deals only with the convention for locating objects on the surface of the Earth. It does *not* deal with time measurements, and no official international agreement has been reached there.

Nevertheless, it is unofficially accepted that the time based on the Sun's position at Greenwich (or "Greenwich time") is *the* time. Undoubtedly, when we set up our space stations and our colonies on

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the Moon's surface—all under conditions where the position of the Sun will mean nothing—it will be Greenwich time that will be used.

Why not, therefore, set our standard as noon on Tuesday at Greenwich, and choose as our 180° line, the 180° line as calculated from Greenwich? Since Greenwich is at 0° Longitude (neither east nor west) by definition, the 180° line associated with it happens to be the one that is marked 180° Longitude (neither east nor west) on any map.

It is at the line of 180° Longitude, then, that one moves a day backward by crossing it travelling eastward, and moves a day forward by crossing it travelling westward.

As it happens, this—through sheer accident—is the most convenient arrangement possible. Greenwich Observatory was chosen as the site for the Prime Meridian for reasons that had nothing to do with time measurement, yet its 180° line travels north-south right through the middle of the Pacific Ocean, at precisely the point where a day change can be made with the least possible inconvenience.

It would be unthinkable, for instance, to have the 180° line pass through the middle of the United States, or the middle of the Soviet Union and expect the people of part of a nation to be operating one day behind or ahead of the people of the other part. As it is, the line of 180° Longitude crosses over ocean water through almost its entire length in places that are as far removed from the major land masses as possible. Imagine that line just happening to be opposite London!

To be sure, 180° Longitude does cut across the eastern tip of Siberia and makes its way through some island chains. The line along which a sudden twenty-four hour change takes place is therefore not precisely along the 180° Longitude line throughout its stretch. The accepted line of change bends east and west as much as three to five hundred miles in places in order to place the tip of Siberia with the rest of the Soviet Union on one side of the line and the westmost Aleutian Islands with the rest of the United States on the other side of the line. South of the equator there is an eastern bulge to allow certain islands to be on the same side of the line as Australia and New Zealand.

This somewhat irregular line is the "International Date Line"—which is made use of internationally, even though it has never been the subject of an official international agreement!

And there you are! Crossing the date line cannot in any possible way involve you in paradoxes; and certainly, it can never—by any conceivable stretch of the imagination—involve you in time travel.

Please say you see it now, for if you don't, I am all out of explanation, and I still don't have any exclamatory remark to fall back upon.

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This story takes place on a tiny island off the coast of Yucatan. Over the old hotel which headquarters a medical research team flies the yellow pennant of the World Health Organization, bright red letters spelling out Polsaker's First Postulate, "Death is a curable disease." The research team is investigating two non-accidental deaths, the first to occur anywhere in the world in nearly forty years . . .

THE FIRST POSTULATE

by Gerald Jonas

July 17

My Darling Ann,

I probably shouldn't be writing this. I can't believe they'll let anything get through, and if Otto finds these pages, there's no telling how he'll react. The island has been sealed tight for a week. I don't know what they've told you or how they've explained it to the public, but you can be sure that whatever they said is a lie. No one here seems willing to face the facts, except Diaz maybe. Otto's response is to become more and more of a martinet. This morning he instituted a form of military inspection in the little beach huts we moved into the day after the fire. (They're nothing but cabanas really, scattered around a secluded cove a few minutes' walk from the site of the old hotel.) Otto had us line up on the white sand outside the huts in as complete uniform as possible—which wasn't easy because some of us lost almost everything in the fire, and until they drop us new whites, we look more like a band of *chicleros* than a Medical Research Mission. Otto didn't see anything amusing about it. We stood outside in the hot sun, while he went through our belongings. As a precaution against cockroaches, he said. (Diaz says that all the cockroaches on the island were exterminated twenty-five years ago, but

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Otto won't listen. Of course, we all know it isn't cockroaches he's afraid of.)

I don't know why we still obey him. Habit? Fear? I'm not the only one who thinks that Our Leader may have snapped a few synapses under the strain. Medical men who take administrative posts in W.H.O. are always a little bit suspect anyway. Dr. Stewart, on the other hand—who I thought would be devastated by the loss of his precious lab facilities—seems almost unaffected. He's managed to salvage a handful of instruments and rig them up in what's left of the hotel basement, and he's looking forward to a drop of new equipment which he claims the Surgeon-General has promised him, and I think he's actually happier now than before. He's the senior member of the mission (Elapsed-Age 102), and only last night I heard him talking excitedly to one of his assistants about the "once-in-a-lifetime" challenge. From what I know about Stewart, I doubt that the irony was intentional.

This is our fifteenth day on the island. The natives—the fishermen and *cocal* workers who live here—have left us entirely alone since the night of the fire. In fact, they treat us like outcasts, like lepers, if you're familiar with that old word. It's like being in a quarantine inside another quarantine. Fortunately, the island is just big enough, and we're quite isolated here on the northeast tip of it—with two miles of thickly wooded *monte* between us and the principal town of Santa Teresa—and as long as the U.N. airdrops continue, there shouldn't be any problem about food or water . . .

Annie, if only I'd broken regulations and given you some hint of what was up before I left New York! The whole point of the Concordat is that every report of "natural death" has to be investigated, no matter what the source, and that means at least a half dozen expeditions like ours every year, chasing all over the world on one false alarm after another. In most cases, a quick re-autopsy shows that the local M.O. has simply botched an accidental poisoning or asphyxiation trauma, and then panicked. For obvious reasons the civilian authorities like us to keep everything as hush-hush as possible, but medically speaking, it's all strictly routine. My name just happened to be at the top of the Iso Section duty roster when the first S.O.S. came in from this tiny island off the coast of Yucatán. As I say, no one got very excited, but we moved fast; it was taken for granted that we'd be down there and back in twenty-four hours. Our advance copter touched down on the northern tip of Isla Caracoles at 10:15 a.m., local time. By noon the word had flashed through the mission like a laser beam: at least

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two deaths had been confirmed as "non-accidental." This was no false alarm. For the first time in nearly forty years something had gone wrong with the immunity.

My immediate reaction (and I hate to admit it, even to you, Annie) was not fear or panic or compassion or curiosity even, but a kind of cold joy—If isotopy played any part at all in the diagnosis, I knew I would get a mention in the final report, and no matter what else happened, the report was certain to come to the attention of the most influential people in the highest government circles—does that sound terribly callous to you, Ann? We've never spelled it out in so many words before, but we both know that our chances for a Family Certificate are almost nil unless I can swing a 2nd Class Commission in the next year or so, and I've just about given up hope of making any mark for myself in pure research—most fields are already so crowded, it's hard enough to find a subject, much less contribute anything. I suppose I should have been born sometime back in the early Twentieth Century and lived out my time before the Freeze—I don't really mean that, darling, unless I could have had you with me, and even then, even under the best of circumstances, we would have had only a few years together, whereas now, when I say that I will love you forever and ever . . .

As soon as the cargo copters landed, we began moving our heavy equipment into the empty rooms on the first and second floors of the old tourist hotel. There hadn't been any tourists for years and years, of course, but the Mexican government maintained a complete native staff—as part of the Freeze—so the place wasn't a total ruin. We steri-flashed the building from top to bottom, and had the two bodies transported from the small dispensary in Santa Teresa.

Otto called a meeting at eleven o'clock that night in a large circular ballroom on the ground floor. We were forty-six in all, including Dr. Miguel Diaz Ramirez, the local medical officer, a youngish-looking fellow (E.-A. 57) with a very light complexion and a little brush of a moustache, who came from Vera Cruz and had been assigned here by his government for a ten-year hitch. It was Diaz who had discovered the two *muertos,* as he called them, in a small hut on the southern end of the island, at the base of a little hill the natives call Mount Itzá.

The bodies, strapped side by side on a portable prosthetic couch, were wheeled into the ballroom and placed up against a round dais or bandstand in the center of the floor. Otto, Diaz and Dr. Stewart took seats on the dais itself, and the rest of us opened folding chairs and sat in a ragged semi-circle around them. The arrangement seemed to appeal to Otto's drama-

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tic sense. He came to the very edge of the platform, peered down at the *muertos* as if into a grave, and then lifted his eyes slowly and deliberately to take in the entire scene. When he spoke, there was an unaccustomed tremolo in his usually booming voice.

First, he thanked us for the teamwork and efficiency we had demonstrated so far. Then he said that we would have to extend ourselves even further in the difficult days ahead. Then he took a deep breath and said, "Most of you are probably aware that the preliminary diagnosis made by our colleague, Dr. Diaz Ramirez, has been confirmed by Drs. Stewart, Rappell, Chiang, and myself. There seems to be no doubt that we are dealing with two interrelated cases of microorganic trauma. In some way yet to be determined, their Polsaker Immunity failed to function—there was apparently no reversal of incipient tissue-degeneration—and the two subjects succumbed to something that appears to be—and let me emphasize that this conclusion is of the most tentative nature, pending an exhaustive re-autopsy—something very similar, at any rate, to what used to be known as 'atypical' or 'virus' pneumonia." Otto paused to let the shock sink in, and someone in the ballroom giggled. Out loud.

There was a ghastly silence. Otto's face went bright red, and everyone looked around indignantly to see who the culprit could be. But the truth is, Annie, it could have been any one of us. We had been working under terrific tension all day without any idea of what we were up against; rumors had been running wild, with most speculation revolving around certain hypothetical mutations of rare tropical parasites—and now Otto was talking about "virus pneumonia," which is a phrase out of any standard medical history textbook. According to the Theory of Permanent Immunity, there's as much chance of a person contracting virus pneumonia today as there is of his being run over by a traffic balloon—or dying of "old age."

In that brief moment of silence before Otto regained control of the meeting, I glanced across the platform to see how Dr. Stewart and Dr. Diaz were taking it. Dr. S. looked preoccupied as usual, and I doubt if he even heard the interruption; his eyes seemed to be focussed on some point in the ceiling directly over Otto's head. But Diaz was staring straight down at the two *muertos*, and he was smiling one of the strangest smiles I've ever seen. He looked like a man who had bet his entire fortune that the world would end tomorrow, and had just been informed that he was a winner.

I've gotten to know Diaz pretty well since then, but at the time he was just one more stranger on an island of strangers, and I was much

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too busy in the next few days to talk to anybody. Once we got organized, we must have run a hundred tracer-series through the Isographs, and the other sections kept sending more work down to us. Everybody was working sixteen, eighteen, twenty hours a day. The only people who had a chance to explore the rest of the island were the veterinarians, whose job was to round up a cross-section of the island's fauna—wild boar, deer, iguana, assorted snakes and jungle birds, fish from the surrounding waters and the giant edible conch that gives the island its name—as well as a significant sample of the local pet population. The vets reported that the town of Santa Teresa was a pretty little antique, that the inhabitants were reserved but not unfriendly and that the results of their initial investigations were all negative: the animal-life of Isla Caracoles seemed perfectly normal in every way.

We had taken over the top two floors of the hotel for living quarters, and I drew a large corner room on the top floor with a view of the entire "tourist" enclave—unused cabanas, two empty swimming pools, carefully rolled tennis courts without nets, heliport, decorative coconut palms—all set in the most brilliant white sand imaginable and connected by a network of footpaths paved with crushed sea shells. Where the white sand gave out, there was a shallow salt-water inlet crossed by a rickety wooden bridge, and on the other side of the inlet, the dark green *monte* began. Every morning the natives raised the green-white-and-red banner of the Mexican Republic on a flagpole in front of the hotel; directly under it, Otto had them fly the yellow pennant of the World Health Organization with the bright red letters spelling out the brave boast of Polsaker's First Postulate, "Death is a curable disease."

My personal contacts with the islanders during this time were limited to an occasional glimpse of the little maid who cleaned my room, a blank smile from the sleepy-looking desk clerk, and a few words with the one waiter, who liked to practice his minimal menu-English. Most of the natives here speak an incomprehensible mixture of bad Spanish and bits and pieces of the old Mayan tongue which they've managed to preserve over the centuries. According to Diaz, they're extremely proud of their "pure" Indian blood, and they claim to be direct descendants of the original Mayans who built those stone cities in the jungles of Central America hundreds of years ago and then just abandoned them for no apparent reason long before the Spaniards arrived. The strange thing is, they do show an almost uncanny resemblance to those little pre-Columbian clay figurines you see in museums.

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But in other ways, the island turned out to be very much a part of the Twenty-first Century. We were able to confirm through every available channel—Diaz's superiors in Mexico City, the Polsaker Foundation in Geneva, W.H.O. headquarters in New York—that the deceased couple, Manuel and Maria Canche, Elapsed-Age 61 and 59 respectively, had been immunized on June 12, 1980, in a temporary government clinic in Santa Teresa. This meant that the Canches of Isla Caracoles had been among the first few thousand people outside of the United States and Soviet Russia to receive their immunization shots. The reason for this almost unbelievable good fortune was explained by Diaz, who said that the Mexican government had illegally carried out its own independent tests (as most governments did, despite the terms of the Concordat), and the federal authorities had purposely chosen out-of-the-way testing places like the Yucatán. Such tests usually involved deliberate infection of freshly immunized volunteers with everything from cancer to the common cold and all too often, in the name of scientific accuracy, the infection of a control group who had not been immunized at all. Anyway, it was clear that the Canches had been protected by the Polsaker Effect for nearly forty years, and according to everything we know about it, the protection should become even stronger over the years as the adjustment between the host and the sub-bacterial symbiont is gradually perfected.

Two days later Otto called a second meeting in the hotel ballroom, and the chiefs of all sections —Neuro, Radio, Iso, Ortho, etc. —read their reports aloud. They had already submitted them in writing, and copies had been made available to every member of the mission, but Otto wanted to be sure we were familiar with the material. Each speaker kept coming back to the same point, to the same phrase even: "A textbook case of virus pneumonia, without complications."

Otto stood up at the end to summarize. (This was really Stewart's prerogative, as the ranking medical man, but he usually deferred to Otto in such matters.) Otto cleared his throat and looked around the room, glancing up and down the irregular rows of folding chairs as if he were counting the house. If nothing else, the gesture gave everyone a good view of his beautiful profile; he was nearly fifty when he got his shots, but he goes in for the most ostentatious cosmetic surgery—nose, chin, neck, waist—and he looks more like twenty now. And his voice of course is a masterpiece of the laryngologist's art.

He began by saying that all doubts as to the cause of death had now been removed, and the time had come for us to face the conse-

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quences of our findings. There were only two possibilities to consider. Either the v.p. was a wild mutant strain, so different from anything ever encountered that the immunity could not cope with it (in which case it should not have reacted so conventionally to the standard diagnostic procedures), or the symbiont itself had somehow "died out", leaving the hosts totally unprotected (which was in direct contradiction to the Theory of Permanent Immunity). Either way, he said, we had no choice but to re-examine everything we knew about the immunity. We would have to proceed, for all practical purposes, as if we had never heard of Polsaker's Five Postulates. With that, he threw the meeting open to questions.

An undercurrent of protest had begun to buzz through the room, even before he finished speaking. Now, half the members of the mission were on their feet demanding to be recognized; everyone was arguing with someone else; people were waving papers and shouting for attention. Otto tried to restore order but two of the men—both section chiefs—refused to sit down. They kept insisting that Otto had misrepresented their findings; yes, they had said such-and-such, but they hadn't meant to imply thus and so! Well, I'm certainly the last one to defend Otto, but in this case it was pretty clear that they were attacking him for drawing conclusions which they themselves didn't have the guts to face. I don't know how long the argument would have gone on if Dr. Stewart hadn't risen from his chair and held up his right hand for attention. Everybody shut up, as much out of surprise at seeing him take the floor as out of respect for the man and his reputation. You remember him, Annie—he spoke at my graduation. He was nearly sixty-two when he got his shots, and with his long white hair and the thick eyeglasses which he still affects, he looks more like the classic figure of a pre-Polsaker scientist than anyone I've ever seen, except Polsaker himself. His voice sounded faint and wavery compared to Otto's, but what he said was clear enough. "Gentlemen, the truth is we've never known very much about the immunity, except that it works. As long as it did work, we could amuse ourselves with theories and postulates and academic discussions. Now we are faced with a breach in our defenses, and I don't think I have to remind you that a great deal more than our theories is at stake." He sat down to absolute silence.

No doubt the meeting should have ended right then, but Otto jumped to his feet to announce that there was one more piece of business that had to be dealt with: the mayor of Santa Teresa had asked permission to address the mission, and he was waiting outside in the anteroom. There was no way to put

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him off now without showing great discourtesy or revealing that something had gone wrong.

The mayor was ushered into the ballroom and Diaz led him up the small flight of stairs onto the dais. He was a very small man, barely five feet tall, with long arms, huge dark eyes and the deeply-lined weather-beaten face of a pre-Freeze fisherman. He was wearing a wrinkled white suit, white shoes, a white sport shirt open at the collar, and under his right arm he clutched a wide-brimmed straw hat. The sight of the assembled *profesores* seemed to overwhelm him and he turned to Diaz for reassurance. Diaz leaned forward to whisper something to him; the little man nodded, held up both his hands as if to beg our indulgence, and then burst into an impassioned oration that ran on for nearly twenty minutes without a break. Several members of the mission were quite proficient in Spanish, but he was speaking so fast and with such eccentric pronunciation that I don't think anyone understood a word. I certainly didn't. I could see Otto squirming in his chair; he knew that Stewart would hold him personally responsible for the delay in getting back to the labs. Finally the mayor ran out of breath; before he could get a second wind, he was escorted from the room with much shaking of hands and smiles of appreciation. Otto said a few words to him which Diaz apparently repeated in the local dialect. Whatever they were, the little man looked pleased, and there was more handshaking all around before they could get him out the door.

When he was gone, Diaz took the floor to explain what it was all about. As far as he could tell, the people of Santa Teresa were offended because the mission had not been showing enough respect for local customs. No one was quite sure where it had started, but the mayor had felt compelled to warn us that his people might become less cooperative in the future unless the mission took steps to demonstrate good faith. Their demands were simple enough: they wanted the bodies of the *muertos* returned to town for burial services. Immediately.

Diaz said that the island had been in the grip of a "religious revival" for the past two years, sparked by a fanatical new priest from the mainland, one of the so-called "Mayanists" who had recently become an important influence in Mérida, the Yucatán capital. The movement had flourished by combining a simplified Roman Catholicism with odd snatches of mythology from the "golden age" of the Old Mayan Empire; believers tended to be strongly xenophobic, Diaz said, not just toward *gringos* but also toward pure-blooded Spanish Mexicans like himself, and in fact toward anyone of non-Mayan ancestry. They had made his work

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increasingly difficult in recent months, and he recommended treating them with the utmost caution. "There's no telling what these crazy *Indios* might do when the spirit moves them."

Annie, I was talking to Diaz about that meeting just a few hours ago, and he told me that he'd had a premonition at the time that something might go disastrously wrong, and that's why he had tried so hard to impress us with the danger. We were sitting outside his hut on the beach earlier tonight, eating our U.N. rations and sharing a bottle of tequila which he'd managed to put his hands on. Since the fire, he's the only one of us who's been able to maintain contact with the islanders, or at least with a handful of his former patients who have reason to be grateful to him. (His two nurses, local girls who were trained in Mérida, disappeared on the night of the fire, and he hasn't been able to find out if they ran away voluntarily or were abducted, or even whether they're still alive.) From where we were sitting on the beach, we could see the peak of Mount Itzá across the water; Isla Caracoles curves toward the mainland like a crescent moon, and it's only four miles as a crow flies from tip to tip. Diaz told me that the priest, Father Chacuan, had set up a secret chapel on the side of the hill a few months before our arrival; it was supposed to be dedicated to Our Lady of the Sorrows, but Diaz said he was sure that the priest had been using it for hybrid ceremonies of his own devising, ceremonies that even the sympathetic Archbishop of Mérida might have found too blatantly "Mayanist" for Santa Teresa's little stucco cathedral. According to rumor, the chapel had been built around the ruins of an ancient stone temple originally dedicated to Ixchell, the Mayan goddess of fertility. The entire island was once sacred to Ixchell, Diaz says, and pregnant women crossed the dangerous straits in open canoes to beg for the goddess's blessing.

Now, as the sunset faded, we could see a light burning near the top of the hill; every night since the fire that light has been visible against the sky. "They're celebrating the triumph of superstition," Diaz said. He cursed in Spanish and hurled the empty bottle into the luminescent water. Did I tell you that Diaz had completed eight years of duty on the island and that he had been assured by a relative high in the federal government (these things are more easily arranged in Mexico, I gather) that when he finished his tour here, he and his wife would be granted a Family Certificate? For a boy!

"This is Purgatory," he said bitterly, watching the bottle bob up and down in the swell. "I am sentenced to ten years of penance on this putrid sandbar in order to qualify for a child—an heir!—and just

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when I begin to imagine the end is in sight, this new priest arrives and begins preaching against birth control. A priest, mind you, who has sworn to uphold the Concordat. And not only preaching but actually *encouraging* the people to break the law. With my own ears, I heard him tell his parishioners that their ancestors buried women who died in childbirth with the honors usually reserved for heroes who fell in battle. And these *Indios* listened to him. The women became pregnant and came to me for help, and when I told them their babies would have to be destroyed —that I had no choice under the Concordat—they spit in my face and called me a 'baby-murderer. And they refused to submit to sterilization and ran away to the *monte,* where the local police insisted they could not be found. And all the time the priest is teaching them that I am worse than King Herod. Finally I was forced to send my wife home—I didn't know what these people might do, and my superiors refused to take my warnings seriously—and now she sits in our apartment in Vera Cruz with her cats and her birds and her fish and her turtles, and everyday she buys something new for the nursery, and everyday she writes me about what she has bought and exactly how many days we have left before I am through here and the Certificate is granted—'by the grace of God,' as she says." Diaz closed his eyes as if in physical pain. "And now her letters are being opened by some filthy *maricón* at Punta Seca, and God alone knows what they're answering her in my name . . ."

The Caribbean stars came out. Diaz had too much to drink, and after a while he began to talk some wild nonsense about escaping. He said he had a good friend in a fishing village on the other side of the island, and he was sure he could arrange to get a boat. He claimed that he knew the waters of the Yucatán Channel well enough to pilot us to some uninhabited spot down the coast of Quintana Roo. I told him to forget about it. Earlier this afternoon Otto received radio "instructions" from the temporary U.N. base at Punta Seca, ordering everyone to remain on the island and do his job—that's exactly what it said: "Everyone is expected to do his job." Meanwhile the strait is being patrolled by U.N. hovercraft and jets and copters with orders to turn back anyone trying to leave the island, and to destroy any vessel that attempts to break the quarantine. We don't have any choice, Annie—we're supposed to stay on the island until we discover what went wrong with the immunity, and they don't really care what happens to us if we fail. They're afraid that we'll become infected ourselves and bring back whatever it is and set off an epidemic to end all epidemics. I'm con-

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vinced that if we *do* fail, if we can't isolate the problem and cure it, they'll just wait until the v.p. takes us all, and then vaporize the entire island. Already we've heard rumors that two more natives are sick. One of the men from Santa Teresa, a fisherman who was put back together by Diaz after his harpoon-gun exploded, sneaked into our camp last night and told Diaz that the priest had forbidden any of his parishioners to seek medical help, on pain of excommunication.

Otto is absolutely certain that the islanders will start coming back to us when enough of them get sick, but Diaz doesn't think so. He says they're much too frightened of the priest to disobey him, and I can believe it. You can't imagine anyone like this priest, Annie. He's a little taller than the average Indian on the island, with brick-red skin, a shaved head, a long hooked nose, and immense dark eyes, slightly crossed—Diaz says that crossed eyes were considered a sign of beauty among the ancient Mayans, who induced the effect artificially by dangling a ball of gum on a string in front of their children's noses. I first saw the priest exactly one week ago today—three days after the mayor petitioned us for the return of the *muertos*. Otto had put the mayor off with a lot of doubletalk about incubation periods and the need for further decontamination. What he didn't tell him was that the bodies were already undergoing major re-autopsy and that there wouldn't be much left to bury in any case. But the mayor seemed satisfied with the explanation, and Otto evidently figured he could hold him off until our work was completed.

Then the priest's messenger appeared one morning at the front entrance of the hotel with word that Father Chacuan wanted to meet our head-man in exactly one hour on the little wooden bridge connecting the tourist enclave with the island proper. It was nearly eleven o'clock and the sun was already scorching, so Otto suggested that they might be more comfortable in his own airconditioned office instead. The messenger merely repeated the original invitation word for word, and waited for a simple yes or no. Refusal was out of the question; Diaz had already made clear the extraordinary hold that this Reverend Father had on his flock. But Otto didn't like the idea of being summoned to a parley with a priest on the priest's chosen ground and at such short notice. To balance the odds a little, he decided to bring along an impressive "official delegation," for which he could then act as chairman and spokesman. I was called to his office and asked if I would volunteer to serve as one of twelve "assistant negotiators" for the mission—"*silent* assistant negotiators," he added, with that devastat-

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ing smile. I think he had some idea that the islanders would be impressed by my height and my blond hair. It was obviously the kind of scene that appealed to him.

A few minutes before noon we assembled in the front lobby of the hotel—thirteen of us, including Diaz—in our best white dress uniforms and white sun helmets, and marched off down the crushed-shell footpath toward the bridge. The heat was intense; even Diaz commented on it. There wasn't a sign of life anywhere, no birds, no crabs, no lizards, no spiders, no breeze even, nothing but the sun vibrating off the white sand and the white shells. We were all wearing dark glasses except Otto—he had a theory, based on a stray remark of one of the maids, that the islanders considered them a sign of weakness.

Apparently we were early, because when we reached the bridge, the path on both sides of the inlet was empty. Otto checked his watch; it was one minute to twelve. "He knows what he's doing Diaz said, referring to the priest. "He wants us to sweat a little." And sweat we did, standing there in the hot sun, feeling more and more foolish as the stiff white uniforms wilted on our backs, staring across the inlet at the inviting shade of the *monte* that came down almost to the water's edge. There was no shade at all on our side.

We must have waited a half hour at least. The only sound, except for the occasional squeak of a shoe shifting on the dry shells, was the hum of cicadas, like a giant computer working out some unguessable problem in the distant underbrush. Then we heard a rustling of dry leaves on the opposite bank; a solitary figure stepped from the bushes, walked briskly to the exact center of the span, and stopped.

He was dressed in a full length black robe that covered the tops of his shoes; only the thinnest sliver of clerical white showed above his high black outer collar. His shaved head was bare, and there was a thin gold chain around his neck with something dangling from it, just below his chest. I couldn't make it out exactly, but I'm sure it wasn't a crucifix. We all stared at him, and he stared back. Finally, when it became apparent that the priest was not coming any further, Otto took a step toward the bridge, holding out his hand in an unmistakable gesture of friendship. But before he could set foot on the first wooden plank, Father Chacuan swept down from the bridge with a great flapping of black cloth, and came to a halt directly in front of our somewhat disconcerted leader. The priest ignored Otto's outstretched hand until he dropped it. I can't tell you how impressive that little pantomime was: it was obvious that the jungle on the opposite bank was filled with his

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parishioners and that the priest was playing to this audience. It occurred to me that anyone who could upstage our own Doctor Otto at first glance was clearly someone to reckon with.

The two of them were standing only a few feet from me now, so I could hear most of the exchange. The priest spoke in excellent, barely accented English. I remember his exact words: "We have come to retrieve our lost brothers." That was it, no preamble, no amenities.

Otto just smiled and started to give the priest the same song-and-dance he had given the mayor—about the possibility of widespread contamination if the bodies were released prematurely—and he assured Chacuan that just as soon as it was safe, the mission would do everything in its power to cooperate with the local authorities concerning all the necessary arrangements, etc., etc.

The priest listened for a few minutes without changing his expression; then he shook his head slowly and said in a quiet, almost mournful voice, that the *muertos* would have to be returned by six o'clock that evening. If they were not, he would no longer be able to answer for the behavior of his parishioners. Otto tried to say something in reply, but the priest just turned his back, retraced his steps across the bridge, and disappeared into the bushes on the far side. "I think we've been dismissed," one of the men said, and the rest of us laughed nervously.

Back at the hotel we had an impromptu strategy meeting and decided—that is, Otto decided—that we could safely ignore the priest's ultimatum. Dr. Stewart, who had been called down from his lab and was obviously furious at having his work interrupted, said that he agreed completely with Otto, and then excused himself. Diaz was in favor of sending someone into Santa Teresa to try to talk with the priest in private, but Otto said that that would only be a waste of time and manpower. He had been in touch with W.H.O. headquarters in Mérida, and they were getting impatient for results. "We'll talk to him again in a few days," Otto said, "after he's had time to realize that we cannot be intimidated. When that's clear, I don't think we'll find him so unreasonable." Diaz said nothing else, and the meeting was adjourned.

I spent the rest of the afternoon in the Iso Lab, where we had been working on the most promising lead so far, based on the fact that the Mayans have the lowest rate of metabolism of any homogeneous population in the world, which suggested a possible correlation between—Well, it doesn't matter really, because the results from our first series of tests were all negative. By five o'clock we were right back where we'd started from, and everyone was too tired and de-

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pressed to go on to something new, so we closed down the section for the day. I went up to my room and tried to take a nap before dinner, but I didn't sleep; I lay on the bed with my eyes closed and thought of you. I don't have to tell you what I was thinking, do I, Annie? I still believe we have a chance for a Certificate, and I'm certainly willing to try another five years if you are, but I won't stand in your way if you decide not to renew the contract in November. It's the thought that you may say yes, despite everything, that makes me cling to even the remotest possibility of getting off this damned island in one piece.

I wasn't even aware of the fact that six o'clock had come and gone, until I heard the scratchy recorded voice announcing dinner over the intercom. The dining-room clock said 7:15 when I took my place at my usual table. I didn't see Diaz anywhere, and I wondered if he had managed to persuade Otto to let him make another try at reasoning with the priest. After the meal, I poured myself a second cup of coffee—foul stuff they served, but right now I'd give a month's salary for a sip—and went down to the beach and found a quiet place under a huge coconut palm not far from the abandoned cabanas. It was a humid, overcast night, and there was a red glow in the sky to the south, somewhere over the center of the island. It occurred to me that the priest might be holding some kind of outdoor memorial service. I was still depressed about the afternoon's work and feeling very, very far from you, and I was worried about how much longer the job might take if the priest ordered his followers not to cooperate with us. I had just finished the last drop of coffee and was debating whether to return to my room to write you a letter or to go back to the lab to write up my report on the afternoon's failure, when I saw someone slip from behind a tree further down the beach and move soundlessly along the water's edge toward me. There was just enough light for me to make out his face. It was Diaz. As I told you, I wasn't particularly friendly with him at that time, but I thought he would remember me from our expedition to the bridge, so I waved hello and asked him if he was out for an evening stroll. He stopped and peered at me cautiously from a distance; when he saw who I was, he came closer and said in a low voice, "I've been to Santa Teresa." I asked him if anything was wrong. He said that the priest was holding a high requiem mass in the cathedral; the entire town was there; the building itself was jammed, and the overflow nearly filled the central plaza. The red glow I had seen in the sky was from the torches they were carrying. Diaz said that the interior of the cathedral was draped entirely

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in black, and in place of an altar, there were two coffins laid side by side, also draped in black, with a single candle at the foot of each. The coffins were open, and they were empty. "I've never seen such a service," Diaz said. "It was all in Mayan and I couldn't make out half the words, but from what I did hear . . ." He broke off and I heard my own voice, lowered to a whisper, asking him, "What? What is it?"

"I think he was offering them absolution if they come and take the bodies by force."

We hurried back to the hotel to find Otto. He was alone in his office; Diaz repeated exactly what he had told me. He said he couldn't be sure, but he thought that they might be planning to try something tonight. He suggested posting a couple of men with radios at the wooden bridge. Otto shook his head. "I'm afraid I can't take this melodramatic cleric of yours quite so seriously," he said. "Sentries seem a little excessive, don't you think, Doctor?" Just then the aerophone on his desk buzzed; it was one of his administrative assistants calling to report that the entire house staff had walked off the job—the kitchen people, the cleaning women, the waiters, the porters, everyone. Otto, to give him credit, didn't even look surprised. "They've probably gone into town for the show," he said. "Well, we won't begrudge them an evening off." He told his assistant to see that all the absolutely essential tasks were divided among mission personnel for the night and ordered him to report back in the morning if the islanders hadn't returned by seven-thirty. Then he said to Diaz, "If he keeps those people away tomorrow, we'll go and have another talk with him. But I think you'll see that won't be necessary."

We left the room together. Outside, Diaz stalked off without a word, obviously furious at having his warning ignored. I felt a little sorry for him, but I couldn't help agreeing with Otto. It was inconceivable that the natives would interfere with the work of a Medical Research Mission when their own lives might be at stake. Diaz had been on the island too long, that was all.

But I felt restless after the interview, and instead of going up to my room, I decided to return to the lab and finish typing out my report. That took longer than I expected, and it was late—past midnight—when I locked the lab door behind me and walked back through the hotel lobby to the elevator. One of Otto's men—a neuroanesthetician whom I knew slightly—was sitting behind the front desk, leafing through a fat bundle of research summaries. He said that he had volunteered for the first shift as "night watchman" as long as the strike lasted, since he usually put in three or four hours of

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work at this time of night anyway, and he could do his paperwork just as easily here as in the lab. I asked him how long he thought the "strike" would last, and he laughed and said, "Until they all sober up."

The elevator creaked up the four flights. From the window in my room I could see that the sky was still overcast, and the red glow to the south was, if anything, even brighter. I told myself that that only confirmed Otto's theory: the memorial service had probably turned into a pretty festive wake by now.

I don't know how long I slept, but it must have been quite a while, because I remember coming out of a murky, unpleasant dream with the vague sensation that something was wrong. The air in the room was absolutely still, and there was no sound. I realized that the airconditioner had stopped working. I got out of bed and went to the window to see what I could do with the controls. As far as I could tell, something had blown inside; the unit looked at least twenty-five years old. Fortunately, the hotel had old-fashioned windows that opened like doors onto a small concrete balcony. The hinges were corroded from long exposure to the salt air, but I managed to work them open after a little pushing and pulling. There was a light sea-breeze, and I stepped out onto the balcony to get it on my face. The southern sky was still bright red. At first, I thought it might be only some effect of the wind on the clouds that made the bright center of the glow appear to be moving toward our end of the island. Then I heard what sounded like shouts in the distance; in another minute I could make out individual points of light flickering here and there among the trees of the *monte*. As they came closer, snaking toward the inlet on some invisible footpath, I tried to count the wavering lights, but there were too many. I watched until the first of the marchers emerged from the bushes beside the bridge and began to file across the inlet, the light from their torches doubled in the dark water; then I pulled on a pair of pants and ran out into the hall. Apparently I was the only one who had seen the procession; the rest of the building seemed asleep. I rushed down the hall to the elevator and pressed the call button. There was no response, and I pressed it again, listening for the sound of the ancient machinery starting into life at the bottom of the shaft. Nothing. I wondered for a moment if it could all be just a bad dream. Then I bolted for the staircase and raced down, two, three, four steps at a time, praying that when I got to the lobby I would not be the only one there. . . . I hit the last landing and turned the corner of the stairwell; the lobby was dark; the night

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watchman and two other men were standing at the glass front door; over their heads I could see a seemingly endless line of torches swaying down the glittering pathway from the bridge. Someone—not me, Annie—pulled the fire alarm, and it must have operated on its own battery power because bells started ringing all over the building. People came racing down the stairs in their pajamas and underwear, or with towels wrapped around their waists. Someone started yelling, "Fire, fire, fire, fire!" and someone else was screaming, "Keep calm, everyone keep calm." Outside, the torch bearers were clearly visible now. At the head of the procession, not carrying a torch but illuminated by all the blazing lights behind him, was the unmistakable figure of the priest in his long black robe; on his head he wore a strange helmet of some kind, with what looked like a golden spike sticking straight out from his forehead, directly above his eyes. Most of us were pressed up against the glass doors now, and I heard Otto shouting to the men to let him through. Then he and Diaz were standing beside me. Diaz pointed to the priest's helmet and said something to Otto—all I could make out were the words "thunder-god." The procession was almost upon us. It looked like the entire population of Santa Teresa, women and children included, and everyone except the priest was carrying a torch. They formed a human wall in front of the hotel, and the priest stepped forward. Again, I have to give Otto credit: whatever else he may be, he's not a coward. He pulled open the glass doors and, without any hesitation, walked out onto the flagstone terrace. I saw Diaz take one step, as if to follow him; then he changed his mind and let the door swing back against his foot, keeping it open just a crack to hear through.

The confrontation was a brief one. There was absolute silence when the priest raised his right hand. He shouted three words in Spanish: *"Denos los muertos!"* ("Give us the dead ones!") I could see Otto clasp his hands in front of his chest, as if in prayer; then he took a step toward the priest and, spreading his arms wide, he spoke out in his clear, precise Spanish: "Friends, you must believe me when I tell you that you are asking the impossible. Our only purpose here is to discover the cause of this terrible tragedy that has taken the lives of two of your countrymen, and to protect you against the danger. For your own safety, then, we have been forced to make use of the bodies in a scientific examination . . ."

The priest held up his right hand again, only now it was a clenched fist. "We are not interested in causes or safety. Everything that has happened has been fore-

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seen, and everything that has been foreseen will come to pass. I preach the Imitation of Christ and the Ancient Ways. Jesus died on the Cross, and Chac wept sweet rain, and we must follow them into the Valley of the Shadow of Death where the Orchids of Redemption grow. There is no other way." He obviously was speaking not to Otto or to us, but to his own followers. His helmet gleamed in the light of the massed torches, and now I could see that it wasn't a spike on his forehead but a long scaly device with a loop on the end that might have represented a snake coiled to strike. Before Otto could speak again, someone in the crowd shouted, *"Denos los muertos,"* and the rest of them took it up immediately, like a chant. I'm not sure the priest planned it that way, but once they started, I don't know if even he could have stopped them. They kept repeating it over and over again, while their priest stood motionless with his arms folded across his chest, looking straight up into the red sky as if awaiting further instructions. Then someone in the crowd—perhaps on a signal from the priest, but I didn't see any—hurled a torch onto the terrace, missing Otto by inches. The fiery end fell against the glass door. I was standing just inside, and on some kind of reflex, I wrenched open the door and kicked the torch away, just as Otto turned and ran back toward the building. He made it safely inside, but before we could shut the door behind him, a shower of torches rained on the terrace and one of them skidded through the opening into the lobby; in a second the drapes were on fire. The ancient sprinkler system in the ceiling went on, and then off. A moment later the lobby was an inferno . . .

I won't try to describe the rest of it, Ann. Somehow a few of us managed to get out through windows or doors in the rear of the hotel, where it backs up to a sea wall above an unprotected spit of jagged black rock. We clung to the rocks for what seemed like hours while the hotel burned. Toward morning, when the roar of the flames began to die down, we could hear the remnants of the mob still shouting and dancing around the wreckage of the smoldering building. My clothes were all singed and torn, and I was burned from head to foot, and I'm not completely clear about what happened next—I may have been delirious for a time—but I think that the shouting changed as the fire died out and the sun came up. It seemed to me that after a while, instead of *"Denos los muertos, denos los muertos,"* the islanders began to chant *"Denos la muerte, denos la muerte,"* ("Give us Death, give us Death"). Diaz, who was nearly killed as we fled, thinks that I may be right.

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We've had one more meeting with the priest since the fire. This time he came to the bridge with a delegation of ten disciples, all dressed in black robes and wearing helmets with identical coiled-snake motifs. We tried to impress them with the fact that everyone on the island may die if they don't cooperate with us, but the priest just laughed, as if we were telling him something that he already knew. Then he said, "It's better to die as men than to live as guinea pigs," and his ten disciples muttered their approval.

There are only twenty-two of us left. Otto insists that we can still complete our mission if we stick together, but I don't know how long we can hold out, even if the U.N. keeps dropping us food and supplies. We're afraid the v.p. may sweep through the native population, and there's always the chance that our own enclave may be affected. Several men have already reported a number of suspicious complaints—slight fever, chills, sore throat, dyspnea—but without our equipment, there's no telling how much of this can be attributed to a psychosomatic reaction. Diaz thinks that it's madness to try to go on without the results of our earlier work, without our notes, without the *muertos*. Even if we could get the labs in operation again—even if W.H.O. dropped us enough equipment to build a hospital from the ground up—the islanders would just come back and burn it down again, and probably kill us all this time. And the real horror is that we would probably do nothing to defend ourselves. Diaz says that the islanders have learned to accept the idea of death again (death as sacrifice, death as deliverance) and so, in a way, they're free to kill, but we could never take another life, even in self-defense, because life itself has become too precious to us. Everything we've been taught for the last forty years has conditioned us against violence, and left us helpless in the face of it. Diaz is sure that the U.N. won't even intervene if the islanders try to burn us out. But by the same reasoning, he thinks we have a chance of slipping through the quarantine—even if their patrols spot us, he doesn't believe they'd fire.

I don't know what to think, Ann. There are rumors that volunteers may be allowed to land here to help us; one of Otto's men claims that the details are being negotiated by radio. But the catch is that anyone who comes will have to stay on like the rest of us until the mystery is cleared up. I can't imagine anyone on the outside taking that risk. Another rumor says that Polsaker himself may come from Switzerland to try to put his world back together again, but I don't believe it. The truth is, we're trapped on this island like some kind of virulent culture in a sealed jar, and

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we're just too dangerous for anyone to handle.

Diaz has his own theory about what's happened. He explained it to me last night after we'd finished a bottle of tequila. He thinks that the world went into a state of shock when Polsaker stumbled onto the immunity. All of a sudden the rules of the game were changed. Or rather, we realized for the first time just what stakes we were playing for. Mortal men—men who knew that, no matter how careful they were, disease or "death from natural causes" would get them in the end—were *free* to dare almost anything, take risks that seem criminal or insane to us today, travel thousands of miles for a change of scenery, gamble away their bodily strength for the sport of it, go to war for glory or principles or out of greed or even boredom, strike a fatal blow in the name of God or Justice or in a fit of drunkenness. Then we were handed the immunity, the tantalizing prospect of life without limit, world without end—and we responded instinctively with the Freeze. If death was nothing but an avoidable accident, who wanted to risk his share in the millennium by taking one false step? Or for that matter, by taking any step at all?

But there was bound to be a counter-reaction, Diaz says, and where else should it begin but in Mexico, where the people have always worshipped death. He doesn't mean that they're eager to take their own lives. Just the opposite—he thinks that the immunity placed an inhuman burden on all of us: "We killed Fate. That's why these *Indios* are so desperate to stop us. They want the decision taken out of their hands again."

Diaz is all for trying to slip away tonight. He's not worried about carrying the v.p. off the island. For all we know, he says, the world may be waiting for something—or someone—to break the spell. Maybe he's right. People used to talk about "dying well"; it was supposed to be the final test of a man. Annie, I don't know what to do. Even if we did manage to get off this island alive, I could never come to you while there was the slightest chance of my being a carrier, and we can't know for sure just what the incubation period is. Then there's always the chance that Dr. Stewart or Polsaker or someone might work a miracle here as long as the islanders leave us alone—but of course they probably won't, and if the priest leads them against us again, that would be the end . . . Oh my darling Ann, I'm so afraid and I miss you so much and I don't want to live without you, but I don't want to die. Not now. Not yet. Not ever. ◁

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Graham Greene is well known for his novels and "entertainments." He has also produced three collections of short stories; the latest, MAY WE BORROW YOUR HUSBAND?, *has just been published. This memorable fantasy is from his second collection,* A SENSE OF REALITY.

A DISCOVERY IN THE WOODS

by Graham Greene

1

THE VILLAGE LAY AMONG THE great red rocks about a thousand feet up and five miles from the sea, which was reached by a path that wound along the contours of the hills. No one in Pete's village had ever travelled further, though Pete's father had once, while fishing, encountered men from another small village beyond the headland, which stabbed the sea twenty miles to the east. The children, when they didn't accompany their fathers to the shingled cove in which the boats lay, would climb up higher for their games—of "Old Noh" and "Ware That Cloud"—below the red rocks that dominated their home. Low scrub a few hundred feet up gave place to woodland: trees clung to the rock-face like climbers caught in an impossible situation, and among the trees were the bushes of blackberry, the biggest fruits always sheltered from the sun. In the right season the berries formed a tasty sharp dessert to the invariable diet of fish. It was, taking it all in all, a sparse and simple yet a happy life.

Pete's mother was under five feet tall; she had a squint and she was inclined to stumble when she

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walked, but her movements to Pete seemed at their most uncertain the height of human grace, and when she told him stories, as she often did on the fifth day of the week, her stammer had for him the magical effect of music. There was one word in particular, "t-t-t-tree," which fascinated him. "What is it?" he would ask, and she would try to explain. "You mean an oak?" "A t-tree is not an oak. But an oak is a t-t-tree, and so is a b-birch." "But a birch is quite different from an oak. Anyone can tell they are not the same, even a long way off, like a dog and a cat." "A dog and a c-cat are both animals." She had from some past generation inherited this ability to generalize, of which he and his father were quite incapable.

Not that he was a stupid child unable to learn from experience. He could even with some difficulty look back into the past for four winters, but the furthest time he could remember was very like a sea-fog, which the wind may disperse for a moment from a rock or a group of trees, but it closes down again. His mother claimed that he was seven years old, but his father said that he was nine and that after one more winter he would be old enough to join the crew of the boat which his father shared with a relation (everybody in the village was in some way related). Perhaps his mother had deliberately distorted his age to postpone the time when he would have to go fishing with the men. It was not only the question of danger—though every winter brought a mortal casualty along with it, so that the size of the village hardly increased more than a colony of ants; it was also the fact that he was the only child. (There were two sets of parents in the village, the Torts and the Foxes, who had more than one child, and the Torts had triplets.) When the time came for Pete to join his father, his mother would have to depend on other people's children for blackberries in the autumn, or just go without, and there was nothing she loved better than blackberries with a splash of goat's milk.

So this, he believed, was to be the last autumn on land, and he was not much concerned about it. Perhaps his father was in the right about his age, for he had become aware that his position as leader of a special gang was now too incontestable: his muscles felt the need of strengthening against an opponent greater than himself. His gang consisted this October of four children, to three of whom he had allotted numbers, for this made his commands sound more abrupt and discipline so much the easier. The fourth member was a seven-year old girl called Liz, unwillingly introduced for reasons of utility.

They met among the ruins at the edge of the village. The ruins had always been there, and at

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night the children, if not the adults too, believed them to be haunted by giants. Pete's mother, who was far superior in knowledge to all the other women in the village, nobody knew why, said that her grandmother had spoken of a great catastrophe which thousands of years ago had involved a man called Noh—perhaps it was a thunderbolt from the sky, a huge wave (it would have needed a wave at least a thousand feet high to have extinguished this village), or maybe a plague, so some of the legends went, that had killed the inhabitants and left these ruins to the slow destruction of time. Whether the giants were the phantoms of the slayers or of the slain the children were never quite clear.

The blackberries this particular autumn were nearly over and in any case the bushes that grew within a mile of the village—which was called Bottom, perhaps because it lay at the foot of the red rocks—had been stripped bone-bare. When the gang had gathered at the rendezvous Pete made a revolutionary proposal—that they should enter a new territory in search of fruit.

Number One said disapprovingly, "We've never done that before." He was in all ways a conservative child. He had small deep-sunk eyes like holes in stone made by water, and there was practically no hair on his head and that gave him the air of a shrivelled old man.

"We'll get into trouble," Liz said, "if we do."

"Nobody need know," Pete said, "so long as we take the oath."

The village by long custom claimed that the land belonging to it extended in a semi-circle three miles deep from the last cottage—even though the last cottage was a ruin of which only the foundations remained. Of the sea too they reckoned to own the water for a larger, more ill-defined area that extended some twelve miles out to sea. This claim, on the occasion when they encountered the boats from beyond the headland, nearly caused a conflict. It was Pete's father who made peace by pointing towards the clouds which had begun to mass over the horizon, one cloud in particular of enormous black menace, so that both parties turned in agreement towards the land, and the fishermen from the village beyond the headland never sailed again so far from their home. (Fishing was always done in grey overcast weather or in fine blue clear weather, or even during moonless nights; when the stars were sufficiently obscured; it was only when the shape of the clouds could be discerned that by general consent fishing stopped.)

"But suppose we meet someone?" Number Two asked.

"How could we?" Pete said.

"There must be a reason," Liz said, "why they don't want us to go."

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"There's no reason," Pete said, "except the law."

"Oh, if it's only the law," Number Three said, and he kicked a stone to show how little he thought of the law.

"Who does the land belong to?" Liz asked.

"To nobody," Pete said. "There's no one there at all."

"All the same nobody has rights," Number One said sententiously, looking inwards, with his watery sunk eyes.

"You are right there," Pete said. "Nobody has."

"But I didn't mean what you mean," Number One replied.

"You think there are blackberries there, further up?" Number Two asked. He was a reasonable child who only wanted to be assured that a risk was worth while.

"There're bushes all the way up through the woods," Pete said.

"How do you know?"

"It stands to reason."

It seemed odd to him that day how reluctant they were to take his advice. Why should the blackberry bushes abruptly stop their growth on the border of their own territory? Blackberries were not created for the special use of Bottom. Pete said, "Don't you want to pick them one time more before the winter comes?" and they hung their heads, as though they were seeking a reply in the red earth where the ants made roads from stone to stone. At last Number One said, "Nobody's been there before," as if that was the worst thing he could think of to say.

"All the better blackberries," Pete replied.

Number Two said after consideration, "The wood looks deeper up there and blackberries like the shade."

Number Three yawned. "Who cares about blackberries anyway? There's other things to do than pick. It's new ground, isn't it? Let's go and see. Who knows . . . ?"

"Who knows?" Liz repeated in a frightened way and looked first at Pete and then at Number Three as though it were possible that perhaps *they* might.

"Hold up your hands and vote," Pete said. He shot his own arm commandingly up and Number Three was only a second behind. After a little hesitation Number Two followed suit; then, seeing that there was a majority anyway for going further, Liz raised a cautious hand but with a backward glance at Number One. "So you're for home?" Pete said to Number One with scorn and relief.

"He'll have to take the oath anyway," Number Three said, "or else . . ."

"I don't have to take the oath if I'm going home."

"Of course you have to or else you'll tell."

"What do I care about your silly oath? It doesn't mean a thing. I can take it and tell just the same."

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There was a silence: the other three looked at Pete. The whole foundation of their mutual trust seemed to be endangered. No one had ever suggested breaking the oath before. At last Number Three said, "Let's bash him."

"No," Pete said. Violence, he knew, was not the answer. Number One would run home just the same and tell everything. The whole blackberry-picking would be spoilt by the thought of the punishment to come.

"Oh hell," Number Two said. "Let's forget the blackberries and play Old Noh."

Liz began to weep. "I want to pick blackberries."

But Pete had been given time to reach his decision. He said, "He's going to take the oath and he's going to pick blackberries too. Tie his hands."

Number One tried to escape, but Number Two tripped him up. Liz bound his wrists with her hair-ribbon, pulling a hard knot which only she knew—it was for such special skills as this that she had gained her entry into the gang. Number One sat on a chunk of ruin and sneered at them. "How do I pick blackberries with my hands tied?"

"You were greedy and ate them all. You brought none home. They'll find the stains all over your clothes."

"Oh, he'll get such a beating, they'll beat him bare."

"Four against one."

"Now you are going to take the oath," Pete said. He broke off two twigs and held them in the shape of a cross. Each of the other three members of the gang gathered saliva in the mouth and smeared the four ends of the cross. Then Pete thrust the sticky points of wood between the lips of Number One. Words were unnecessary: the same thought came inevitably to the mind of everyone with the act: "Strike me dead if I tell." After they had dealt forcibly with Number One each followed the same ritual. (Not one of them knew the origin of the oath; it had passed down through generations of such gangs. Once Pete, and perhaps all the others at one time or another had done the same in the darkness of bed, tried to explain to himself the ceremony of the oath: in sharing the spittle maybe they were sharing each other's lives, like mixing blood, and the act was solemnized upon a cross because for some reason a cross always signified shameful death.)

"Who's got a bit of string?" Pete said.

They tied the string to Liz's hair ribbon and jerked Number One to his feet. Number Two pulled the string and Number Three pushed from behind. Pete led the way, upwards and into the wood, while Liz trailed alone behind; she couldn't move quickly because she had very bandy legs. Now that he

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realized there was nothing to be done about it, Number One made little trouble; he contented himself with an occasional sneer and lagged enough to keep the cord stretched tight, so that their march was delayed, and nearly two hours passed before they came to the edge of the known territory, emerging from the woods of Bottom onto the edge of a shallow ravine. On the other side the rocks rose again in exactly the same way, with the birch trees lodged in every crevice up to the skyline, to which no one from the village of Bottom had ever climbed; in all the interstices of roots and rocks the blackberries grew. From where they stood they could imagine they saw a blue haze like autumn smoke from the great luscious untouched fruit dangling in the shade.

2

All the same they hesitated a while before they started going down; it was as though Number One retained a certain malevolent influence and they had bound themselves to it by the cord. He squatted on the ground and sneered up at them. "You see you don't dare . . ."

"Dare what?" Pete asked, trying to brush his words away before any doubts could settle on Two or Three or Liz and sap the uncertain power he still possessed.

"Those blackberries don't belong to us," One said.

"Then who do they belong to?" Pete asked him, noting how Number Two looked at Number One as though he expected an answer.

Three said with scorn, "Finding's keeping," and kicked a stone down into the ravine.

"They belong to the next village. You know that as well as I do."

"And where's the next village?" Pete asked.

"Somewhere."

"For all you know there isn't another village."

"There must be. It's common sense. We can't be the only ones—we and Two Rivers." That was what they called the village which lay beyond the headland.

"But how do you *know*?" Pete said. His thoughts took wing. "Perhaps we *are* the only ones. Perhaps we could climb up there and go on forever and ever. Perhaps the world's empty." He could feel that Number Two and Liz were halfway with him—as for Number Three he was a hopeless case; he cared for nothing. But all the same, if he had to choose his successor, he would prefer Number Three's care-for-nothing character to the elderly inherited rules of Number One or the unadventurous reliability of Number Two.

Number One said, "You are just crazy," and spat down into the ravine. "We couldn't be the only ones alive. It's common sense."

"Why not?" Pete said. "Who knows?"

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"Perhaps the blackberries are poisoned," Liz said. "Perhaps we'll get the gripes. Perhaps there's savages there. Perhaps there's giants."

"I'll believe in giants when I see them," Pete said. He knew how shallow her fear was; she only wanted to be reassured by someone stronger.

"You talk a lot," Number One said, "but you can't even organize. Why didn't you tell us to bring baskets if we were going to pick things?"

"We don't need baskets. We've got Liz's skirt."

"And it's Liz who'll be thrashed when her skirt's all stained."

"Not if it's full of blackberries she won't. Tie up your skirt, Liz."

Liz tied it up, making it into a pannier in front, with a knot behind just above the opening of her small plump buttocks. The boys watched her with interest to see how she fixed it. "They'll all fall out," Number One said. "You ought to have taken the whole thing off an' made a sack."

"How could I climb holding a sack? You don't know a thing, Number One. I can fix this easy." She squatted on the ground with a bare buttock on each heel and tied and retied the knot till she was quite satisfied that it was firm.

"So now we go down," Number Three said.

"Not till I give the order. Number One, I'll release you if you promise to give no trouble."

"I'll give plenty of trouble."

"Number Two and Three, you take charge of Number One. You're the rear-guard, see. If we have to retreat in a hurry, you just leave the prisoner behind. Liz and I go ahead to reconnoitre."

"Why Liz?" Number Three said. "What good's a girl?"

"In case we have to use a spy. Girl spies are always best. Anyway they wouldn't bash a girl."

"Pa does," Liz said, twitching her buttocks.

"But I want to be in the van," Three said.

"We don't know which is the van yet. They may be watching us now while we talk. They may be luring us on, and then they'll attack in the rear."

"You're afraid," Number One said. "Fainty goose! Fainty goose!"

"I'm not afraid, but I'm boss, I'm responsible for the gang. Listen all of you, in case of danger we give one short whistle. Stay where you are. Don't move. Don't breathe. Two short whistles mean abandon the prisoner and retreat double-quick. One long whistle means treasure discovered, all well, come as quick as you can. Everybody got that clear?"

"Yah," said Number Two. "But suppose we're just lost?"

"Stay where you are and wait for a whistle."

"Suppose *he* whistles—to confuse?" Number Two asked, digging at Number One with his toe.

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"If he does, gag him. Gag him hard, so his teeth squeak."

Pete went to the edge of the plateau and gazed down, to choose his path through the scrub; the rocks descended some thirty feet. Liz stood close behind him and held the edge of his shirt. "Who are *they*?" she whispered.

"Strangers."

"You don't believe in giants?"

"No."

"When I think of giants, I shiver—here," and she laid her hand on the little bare mount of Venus below her panniered skirt.

Pete said, "We'll start down there between those clumps of gorse. Be careful. The stones are loose and we don't want to make any noise at all." He turned back to the others, who watched him with admiration, envy, and hate (that was Number One). "Wait till you see us start climbing up the other side and then you come on down." He looked at the sky. "The invasion began at noon," he announced with the precision of a historian recording an event in the past which had altered the shape of the world.

3

"We could whistle now," Liz suggested. They were halfway up the slope of the ravine by this time, out of breath from the scramble. She put a blackberry in her mouth and added, "They're sweet. Sweeter than ours. Shall I start picking?" Her thighs and bottom were scratched with briars and smeared with blood the colour of blackberry juice.

Pete said, "Why, I've seen better than these in our territory. Liz, don't you notice, not one of them's been picked. No one's ever come here. These ones are nothing to what we'll find later. They've been growing for years and years and years—why, I wouldn't be surprised if we came on a whole forest of them with bushes as high as trees and berries as big as apples. We'll leave the little ones for the others if they want to pick them. You and I will climb up higher and find real treasure." As he spoke he could hear the scrape of the others' shoes and the roll of a loose stone, but they could see nothing because the bushes grew so thick around the trees. "Come on. If we find treasure first, it's ours."

"I wish it was real treasure, not just blackberries."

"It might be real treasure. No one's ever explored here before us."

"Giants?" Liz asked him with a shiver.

"Those are stories they tell children. Like Old Noh and his ship. There never were giants."

"No Noh?"

"What a baby you are."

They climbed up and up among the birches and bushes, and the sound of the others diminished below them. There was a different

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smell here: hot and moist and metallic, far away from the salt of the sea. Then the trees and bushes thinned and they were at the summit of the hills. When they looked backwards, Bottom was hidden by the ridge between, but through the trees they could see a line of blue as though the sea had been lifted up almost to their level by some gigantic convulsion. They turned nervously away from it and stared into the unknown land ahead.

4

"It's a house," Liz said. "It's a huge house."

"It can't be. You've never seen a house that size—or that shape," but he knew that Liz was right. This had been made by men and not by nature. It was something in which people had once lived.

"A house for giants," Liz said fearfully.

Pete lay on his stomach and peered over the edge of the ravine. A hundred feet down among the red rocks lay a long structure glinting here and there among the bushes and moss which overgrew it—it stretched beyond their sight, trees climbed along its sides, trees had seeded on the roof, and up the length of two enormous chimneys ivy twined and plants flowered with trumpet-mouths. There was no smoke, no sign of any occupant; only the birds, perhaps disturbed by their voices, called warnings among the trees, and a colony of starlings rose from one of the chimneys and dispersed.

"Let's go back," Liz whispered.

"We can't now," Pete said. "Don't be afraid. It's only another ruin. What's wrong with ruins? We've always played in them."

"It's scary. It's not like the ruins at Bottom."

"Bottom's not the world," Pete said. It was the expression of a profound belief he shared with no one else.

The huge structure was tilted at an angle, so that they could almost see down one of the enormous chimneys, which gaped like a hole in the world. "I'm going down to look," Pete said, "but I'll spy out the land first."

"Shall I whistle?"

"Not yet. Stay where you are in case the others come."

He moved with caution along the ridge. Behind him the strange thing—not built of stone or wood—extended a hundred yards or more, sometimes hidden, sometimes obscured by trees, but in the direction he now took the cliff was bare of vegetation, and he was able to peer down at the great wall of the house, not straight but oddly curved, like the belly of a fish or . . . He stood still for a moment, looking hard at it: the curve was the enormous magnification of something that was familiar to him. He went thoughtfully on, pondering on the old legend which

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had been the subject of their games. Nearly a hundred yards further he stopped again. It was as though at this point some enormous hand had taken the house and split it in two. He could look down between the two portions and see the house exposed floor by floor—there must be five, six, seven of them, with nothing stirring inside, except where the bushes had found a lodging and a wing flickered. He could imagine the great halls receding into the dark, and he thought how all the inhabitants of Bottom could have lived in a single room on a single floor and still have found space for their animals and their gear. How many thousand people, he wondered, had once lived in this enormous house? He hadn't realized the world contained so many.

When the house was broken—how?—one portion had been flung upwards at an angle, and only fifty yards from where he stood he could see where the end of it penetrated the ridge, so that if he wished to explore further he had only to drop a few yards to find himself upon the roof. There trees grew again and made an easy descent. He had no excuse to stay, and suddenly aware of loneliness and ignorance and the mystery of the great house, he put his fingers to his mouth and gave one long whistle to summon all the others.

5

They were overawed too, and if Number One had not so jeered at them, perhaps they would have decided to go home with the secret of the house locked in their minds with a dream of one day returning. But when Number One said, "Softies, fainties . . ." and shot his spittle down towards the house, Number Three broke silence. "What are we waiting for?" Then Pete had to act, if he was to guard his leadership. Scrambling from branch to branch of a tree that grew from a plateau of rock below the ridge, he got within six feet of the roof and dropped. He landed on his knees upon a surface cold and smooth as an egg-shell. The four children looked down at him and waited.

The slope of the roof was such that he had to slide cautiously downwards on his bottom. At the end of the descent there was another house which had been built upon the roof, and he realized from where he sat that the whole structure was not one house but a succession of houses built one over the other, and above the topmost house loomed the tip of the enormous chimney. Remembering how the whole thing had been torn apart, he was careful not to slide too fast for fear that he should plunge into the gap between. None of the others had followed him; he was alone.

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Ahead of him was a great arch of some unknown material, and below the arch a red rock rose and split it in two. This was like a victory for the mountains; however hard the material men had used in making the house, the mountains remained the stronger. He came to rest with his feet against a rock and looked down into the wide gap where the rock had come up and split the houses; the gap was many yards across; it was bridged by a fallen tree, and although he could see but a little way down, he had the same sense which he had received above that he was looking into something as deep as the sea. Why was it he half expected to see fishes moving there?

With his hand pressed on the needle of red rock he stood upright and, looking up, was startled to see two unwinking eyes regarding him from a few feet away. Then as he moved again he saw that they belonged to a squirrel, the colour of the rock: it turned without hurry or fear, lifted a plumy tail and neatly evacuated before it leapt into the hall ahead of him.

The hall—it was indeed a hall, he realized, making his way towards it astride the fallen tree, and yet the first impression he had was of a forest, with the trees regularly spaced as in a plantation made by men. It was possible to walk there on a level, though the ground was hummocked with red rock which here and there had burst through the hard paving. The trees were not trees at all but pillars of wood, which still showed in patches a smooth surface, but pitted for most of their length with worm-holes and draped with ivy that climbed to the roof fifty feet up to escape through a great tear in the ceiling. There was a smell of vegetation and damp, and all down the hall were dozens of small green tumuli like woodland graves.

He kicked one of the mounds with a foot and it disintegrated immediately below the thick damp moss that covered it. Gingerly he thrust his hand into the soggy greenery and pulled out a strut of rotting wood. He moved on and tried again a long curved hump of green which stood more than breast-high—not like a common grave—and this time he stubbed his toes and winced with the pain. The greenery had taken no root here, but had spread from tumulus to hump across the floor, and he was able to pluck away without difficulty the leaves and tendrils. Underneath lay a stone slab in many beautiful colours, green and rose-pink and red the colour of blood. He moved around it, cleaning the surface as he went, and here at last he came on real treasure. For a moment he did not realize what purpose those half-translucent objects could have served; they stood in rows behind a smashed panel, most broken into green rubble, but a few intact, ex-

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cept for the discoloration of age. It was from their shape he realized that they must once have been drinking pots, made of a material quite different from the rough clay to which he was accustomed. Scattered on the floor below were hundreds of hard round objects stamped with the image of a human head like those his grandparents had dug up in the ruins of Bottom—objects useless except that with their help it was possible to draw a perfect circle and they could be used as forfeits, in place of pebbles, in the game of "Ware That Cloud." They were more interesting than pebbles. They had dignity and rareness which belonged to all old things made by man—there was so little to be seen in the world older than an old man. He was tempted momentarily to keep the discovery to himself, but what purpose would they serve if they were not employed? A forfeit was of no value kept secret in a hole, so, putting his fingers to his mouth, he blew the long whistle again.

While waiting for the others to join him, he sat on the stone slab deep in thought and pondered all he had seen, especially that great wall like a fish's belly. The whole huge house, it seemed to him, was like a monstrous fish thrown up among the rocks to die, but what a fish and what a wave to carry it so high.

The children came sliding down the roof, Number One still in tow between them; they gave little cries of excitement and delight; they were quite forgetful of their fear, as though it were the season of snow. Then they picked themselves up by the red rock, as he had done, straddled the fallen tree, and hobbled across the vast space of the hall, like insects caught under a cup.

"There's treasure for you," Pete said with pride, and he was glad to see them surprised into silence at the spectacle; even Number One forgot to sneer, and the cord by which they held him trailed neglected on the ground. At last Number Two said, "Coo! It's better than blackberries."

"Put the forfeits into Liz's skirt. We'll divide them later."

"Does Number One get any?" Liz asked.

"There's enough for all," Pete said. "Let him go." It seemed the moment for generosity, and in any case they needed all their hands. While they were gathering up the forfeits he went to one of the great gaps in the wall that must once have been windows, covered perhaps like the windows of Bottom with straw mats at night, and leant far out. The hills rose and fell, a brown and choppy sea; there was no sign of a village anywhere, not even of a ruin. Below him the great black wall curved out of sight; the place where it touched the ground was hidden by the tops of trees that

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grew in the valley below. He remembered the old legend, and the game they played among the ruins of Bottom. "Noh built a boat. What kind of a boat? A boat for all the beasts and Brigit too. What kind of beasts? Big beasts like bears and beavers and Brigit too . . . ."

Something went twang with a high musical sound and then there was a sigh which faded into silence. He turned and saw that Number Three was busy at yet another mound—the second biggest mound in the hall. He had unearthed a long box full of the oblongs they called dominoes, but every time he touched a piece a sound came, each a little different, and when he touched one a second time it remained silent. Number Two, in the hope of further treasure, groped in the mound and found only rusty wires which scratched his hands. No more sounds were to be coaxed out of the box, and no one ever discovered why at the beginning it seemed to sing to them.

6

Had they ever experienced a longer day even at the height of mid-summer? The sun, of course, stayed longer on the high plateau, and they could not tell how far night was already encroaching on the woods and valleys below them. There were two long narrow passages in the house down which they raced, tripping sometimes on the broken floor—Liz kept to the rear, unable to run fast for fear of spilling the forfeits from her skirt. The passages were lined with rooms, each one large enough to contain a family from Bottom, with strange tarnished twisted fixtures of which the purpose remained a mystery. There was another great hall, this one without pillars, which had a great square sunk in the floor lined with coloured stone; it shelved upwards, so that at one end it was ten feet deep and at the other so shallow that they could drop down to the drift of dead leaves and the scraps of twigs blown there by winter winds, and everywhere the droppings of birds like splashes of soiled snow.

At the end of yet a third hall they came, all of them, to a halt, for there in front of them, in bits and pieces, were five children staring back, a half-face, a head cut in two as though by a butcher's hatchet, a knee severed from a foot. They stared at the strangers and one of them defiantly raised a fist—it was Number Three. At once one of the strange flat children lifted his fist in reply. Battle was about to be joined; it was a relief in this empty world to find real enemies to fight, so they advanced slowly like suspicious cats, Liz a little in the rear, and there on the other side was another girl

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with skirts drawn up in the same fashion as hers to hold the same forfeits, with a similar little crack under the mount below the belly, but her face obscured with a green rash, one eye missing. The strangers moved their legs and arms, and yet remained flat against the wall, and suddenly they were touching nose to nose, and there was nothing there at all but the cold smooth wall. They backed away and approached and backed away: this was something not one of them could understand. So without saying anything to each other, in a private awe, they moved away to where steps led down to the floors below; there they hesitated again, listening and peering, their voices twittering against the broken silence, but they were afraid of the darkness, where the side of the mountain cut off all light, so they ran away and screamed defiantly down the long passages, where the late sun slanted in, until they came to rest at last in a group on the great stairs which led upwards into brighter daylight where the enormous chimneys stood.

"Let's go home," Number One said. "If we don't go, soon it will be dark."

"Who's a fainty now?" Number Three said.

"It's only a house. It's a big house, but it's only a house."

Pete said, "It's not a house," and they all turned and looked at him.

"What do you mean, not a house?" Number Two asked.

"It's a boat," Pete said.

"You are crazy. Whoever saw a boat as big as this?"

"Whoever saw a house as big as this?" Liz asked.

"What's a boat doing on top of a mountain? Why would a boat have chimneys? What would a boat have forfeits for? When did a boat have rooms and passages?" They threw their sharp questions at him, like handfuls of gravel to sting him into sense.

"It's Noh's boat," Pete said.

"You're nuts," Number One said. "Noh's a game. There was never anyone called Noh."

"How can we tell? Maybe he did live hundreds of years ago. And if he had all the beasts with him, what could he do without lots of cages? Perhaps those aren't rooms along the passage there; perhaps they are cages."

"And that hole in the floor?" Liz asked. "What's that for?"

"I've been thinking about it. It might be a tank for water. Don't you see, he'd have to have somewhere to keep the water-rats and the tadpoles."

"I don't believe it," Number One said. "How would a boat get up here?"

"How would a house as big as this get up here? You know the story. It floated here, and then the waters went down again and left it."

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"Then Bottom was at the bottom of the sea once?" Liz asked. Her mouth fell open and she scratched her buttocks stung with briars and scraped with rock and smeared with bird-droppings.

"Bottom didn't exist then. It was all so long ago . . ."

"He might be right," Number Two said. Number Three made no comment: he began to mount the stairs towards the roof, and Pete followed quickly and overtook him. The sun lay flat across the tops of the hills which looked like waves, and in all the world there seemed to be nobody but themselves. The great chimney high above shot out a shadow like a wide black road. They stood silent, awed by its size and power, where it tilted towards the cliff above them. Then Number Three said, "Do you really believe it?"

"I think so."

"What about all our other games? 'Ware That Cloud.' "

"It may have been the cloud which frightened Noh."

"But where did everybody go? There aren't any corpses."

"There wouldn't be. Remember the game. When the water went down, they all climbed off the boat two by two."

"Except the water-rats. The water went down too quickly and one of them was stranded. We ought to find *his* corpse."

"It was hundreds of years ago. The ants would have eaten him."

"They couldn't eat the bones."

"I'll tell you something I saw—in those cages. I didn't say anything to the others because Liz would have been scared."

"What did you see?"

"I saw snakes."

"No!"

"Yes, I did. And they're all turned to stone. They curled along the floor, and I kicked one and it was hard like one of those stone fish they found above Bottom."

"Well," Number Three said, "that seems to prove it," and they were silent again, weighed down by the magnitude of their discovery. Above their heads, between them and the great chimney, rose yet another house in this nest of houses, a ladder went up to it from a spot close to where they stood. On the front of the house twenty feet up was a meaningless design in tarnished yellow. Pete memorized the shape, to draw it later in the dust for his father, who would never, he knew, believe their story, who would think they had dug the forfeits—their only proof—up in the ruins at the edge of Bottom. The design was like this:

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"Perhaps that's where Noh lived," Number Three whispered, gazing at the design as if it contained a clue to the time of legends, and without another word they both began to climb the ladder, just as the other children came onto the roof below them.

"Where are you going?" Liz called, but they didn't bother to answer her. The thick yellow rust came off on their hands as they climbed and climbed.

The other children came chattering up the stairs and then they saw the man too and were silent.

"Noh," Pete said.

"A giant," Liz said.

He was a white clean skeleton, and his skull had rolled onto the shoulder-bone and rested there as though it had been laid on a shelf. All round him lay forfeits brighter and thicker than the forfeits in the hall, and the leaves had drifted against the skeleton, so that they had the impression that he was lying stretched in sleep in a green field. A shred of faded blue material, which the birds had somehow neglected to take at nesting-time, still lay, as though for modesty, across the loins, but when Liz took it up in her fingers it crumbled away to a little powder. Number Three paced the length of the skeleton. He said, "He was nearly six feet tall."

"So there *were* giants," Liz said.

"And they played forfeits," Number Two said, as though that reassured him of their human nature.

"Moon ought to see him," Number One said; "that would take him down a peg." Moon was the tallest man ever known in Bottom, but he was more than a foot shorter than this length of white bone. They stood around the skeleton with eyes lowered as though they were ashamed of something.

At last Number Two said suddenly, "It's late. I'm going home," and he made his hop-and-skip way to the ladder, and after a moment's hesitation Number One and Number Three limped after him. A forfeit went crunch under a foot. No one had picked these forfeits up, nor any other of the strange objects which lay gleaming among the leaves. Nothing here was treasure-trove; everything belonged to the dead giant.

At the top of the ladder Pete turned to see what Liz was up to. She sat squatting on the thigh-bones of the skeleton, her naked buttocks rocking to and fro as though in the act of possession. When he went back to her he found that she was weeping.

"What is it, Liz?" he asked.

She leant forward towards the gaping mouth. "He's beautiful," she said, "he's so beautiful. And he's a

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giant. Why aren't there giants now?" She began to keen over him like a little old woman at a funeral. "He's six feet tall," she cried, exaggerating a little, "and he has beautiful straight legs. No one has straight legs in Bottom. Why aren't there giants now? Look at his lovely mouth with all the teeth. Who has teeth like that in Bottom?"

"*You* are pretty, Liz," Pete said, shuffling around in front of her, trying in vain to straighten his own spine like the skeleton's, beseeching her to notice him, feeling jealousy for those straight white bones upon the floor and for the first time a sensation of love for the little bandy-legged creature bucketing to and fro.

"Why aren't there any giants now?" she repeated for the third time, with her tears falling among the bird-droppings. He went sadly to the window and looked out. Below him the red rock split the floor, and up the long slope of the roof he could see the three children scrambling towards the cliff; awkward, with short uneven limbs, they moved like little crabs. He looked down at his own stunted and uneven legs and heard her begin to keen again for a whole world lost.

"He's six feet tall and he has beautiful straight legs." ◀

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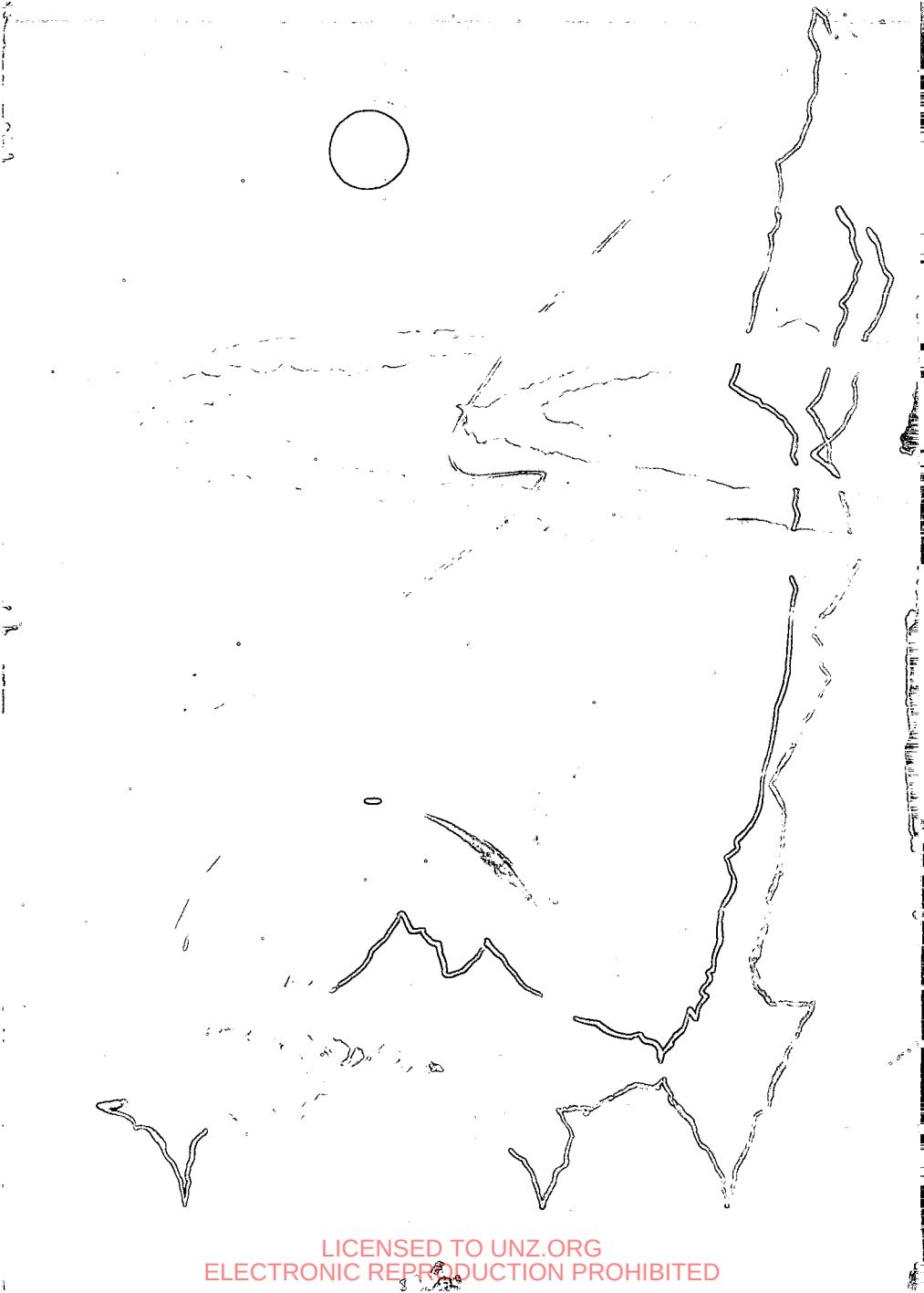

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